UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 065 430 1

La Dore

UNIV. OF CALIF. LIBRARY. LOS ANGELES

John C. Spencer
488 Marshall St
Milwaukee

UN MYSTÈRE

(A MYSTERY)

BY

HENRY GRÉVILLE

(MME. DURAND)

TRANSLATED BY HARVEY C. ALFORD.

CHICAGO:
DONOHUE, HENNEBERRY & CO.,
1890.

PRINTED AND BOUND BY
DONOHUE & HENNEBERRY,
CHICAGO.

UN MYSTÈRE.

(A MYSTERY.)

CHAPTER I.

In the great salon of the de Beaurand mansion, open for the first time in twenty years, the crowd had begun to clear away, and there were not many groups left except in the buffet to which some friends had fled to take some refreshments before leaving. The women were seated nibbling fruit or a piece of cake, the men remained standing; they chatted principally upon the subject of the marriage. Remarkably beautiful was the bride under her veil of lace thrown into relief by her heavy black locks which made a magnificent setting for her beauty. Upon that all agreed, and the men were bound to admit her beauty.

"I like a less imposing style of beauty," said a very elegant young man, "I would not dare to take a woman like her to the Bouffes. And if one could not take one's wife to the Italian opera, then—"

"You. Oh, you know your tastes. It is one of the de Polrey's that you want. Marry, my dear, marry, and you'll go to the Bouffes; I—I answer for that, and to the Eden, and to the Neuilly fair. But you like that."

"Mme. de Beaurand has an excellent smile," said a dowager of a conciliating temperament.

2130095

"Excellent. She is another woman when she smiles."

"And she has smiled all day. I should think her face would be sour."

"Bah! Happiness!"

"Happiness? Not so much as that. It is not a marriage of love, I told you."

"And of what, then? She is rich—as rich as he."

"At least."

"No more is it a marriage of ambition. He is a captain of dragoons, is very refined, thirty-two years of age; but then it is not in that that you are interested."

"It is a marriage of friendship, it seems, almost of convenience."

"On which side?"

"On the side of the bride, of course. As for him, he is an amorous fool. They say—I am speaking only from hearsay—they say that Mlle. Estelle Brunaire has at last consented only through kindness of heart, because she saw that Raymond was losing flesh on account of her. Positively, he has grown thin. You know how that is?"

At this they laughed, one woman cried aloud, one man became reinstated upon that hazarded remark, and finally they dispersed amid hearty handshaking and *phrase poli.*

In one corner of the smoking-room the groom leaned upon the arm of a fauteil, talking in a low tone to Theodore Benoist, his comrade in the line, though some years since retired to private life.

"You are happy?" said Theodore.

"Happy, without doubt, since I hope."

"For what do you hope?"

"To make myself beloved by her; she does not love me."

"Oh, then you heard her speak of you?" And to-day was she not beautiful—beaming!"

"Yes, she was beaming to-day, because she is good, as good as goodness itself. But she spoke of me, you said; she has much, oh, very much friendship for me, but no love. Have you seen anything upon her face resembling the impatient fear of young brides? You see, we have been husband and wife for as much as four hours, and, would you believe, I have not been able to say a word to her in private—that I have not even had an opportunity to kiss her hand."

"In a reception like this, you must admit, my dear Raymond, that privacy——"

"Oh, if she only loved me! I don't see how she can, but then she will find the means. You see, as for me, I adore her."

Raymond passed his hand over his forehead, effaced a wrinkle and arose, smiling.

"You love her too much," said Benoist.

"Yes, I am afraid of it. It is absolutely necessary that she love me. She will love me, won't she?"

"I hope so, and I think so," said his friend, with a confident smile.

"You will remain till we leave? We take the train at six o'clock, to dine at Beaurand, we believe, at seven. I would like to bid you adieu at the last moment."

"All right. I will walk with your aunt. Mme.

Montclar is adorable to-day. She always is. I don't know a finer woman; but to-day her happiness has made her tender."

"She is happy, she, also. She likes Estelle very much. She pretends that between them there is a surprising likeness. I have not yet seen it, but that indicates nothing. My poor aunt; she loves me because of all the others—for my mother whom I never knew, for my father whom I lost so suddenly twenty years ago—— "

Raymond stopped and remained thinking.

"Don't think of that," said his companion, affectionately. "This day should not be marred by sad thoughts."

"I think of it always," said the young man, sadly. "Not a day has gone by since his death but that I have seen the face of my poor father—such as I can remember. That tragical death has left upon me an ineffacable print."

"Be reasonable; a hunting accident could come to anyone."

"Possibly. However, the remembrance of that catastrophe does not cease to haunt me a single day."

"Hold on, my friend, I am going to scold you soundly. See your wife at the end of the *salon rouge*, and did you say, that at the end of three hours you were going to be at home alone?"

"You are right. Thanks. Immediately. You will await me as it is agreed. I will go and dress."

He arose, shook the hand of his friend, and went away.

Theodore absently followed him with his eyes

and saw him approach the group where his wife was seated. She had removed her veil, her head was slightly turned to one side, her graceful form was resting easily in her dress of heavy gilded white silk, she looked like an ancient portrait. Her regular profile, her beautiful black eyes, the sweetness of her face, the extraordinary expression of kindness from her smiling lips gave to her a greater charm than her beauty. In the midst of the heavy green foliage, in a frame of garlands, among the innumerable white bouquets of every form and aspect, the bride seemed to be a young goddess surrounded with original offerings which she welcomed with thanks.

Raymond went up to her and spoke a few words to her. Benoist did not hear the words; but the attitude of his friend, not less than the manner in which he placed his hand upon the back of his wife's chair, showed a tenderness so absolute, a passion so absorbing, that Theodore was surprised by it. She answered her husband raising her eyes to his. The look was listless, the smile was confident, a slight laugh showed the white teeth, and she turned her head away like a child that amuses itself, her whole being respired the sweet grace and tranquillity of a soul supremely happy.

"I hope she will love him," thought Benoist. "It would be terrible if these two charming souls should not understand each other."

They all arose, the relations and friends stood up and extended their congratulations and good wishes to the newly married couple, now standing side by side. The Captain was a head taller than

his wife, but he was unusually tall, and alone, among them all, Mme. Montclar was as tall as Estelle. The blue eyes, the auburn hair and the light moustache of Raymond made a brilliant contrast with the dark beauty of his wife; but she possessed the pink tinted cheeks of the blonde, which one sometimes finds with dark eyes and which double the attraction.

"Raymond cannot see the likeness between his wife and his father's sister. I can see it," said Benoist to himself. "There is a similarity of general lines, a similar construction of the head. Forty years from now, Mme. de Beaurand will be another Mme. Montclar, just as beautiful and probably prettier."

The guests dispersed in the salon, he stepped forward a few steps and was in speaking distance.

"I am going to dress," said the wife, "and you, Raymond, hurry up."

Beaurand bent over the hand which his wife had placed on the fauteil and kissed it, then, saluting the people present, he went out.

"And, as for me," said Estelle, "I must also get ready. If we should miss the train! On the day of the wedding! Such a thing was never heard of before!"

"There are other trains," said Mme. Montclar, philosophically.

"And our Vatel who should have prepared a magnificent dinner for us. In the event of his failure there would be despair. What a debut for my matrimonial career! I must go. Adieu."

She disappeared behind a portière of tapestry that fell around her, the folds of her train following

her in a rippling of silk and lace. Her aunt, after having accompanied the last of the guests to the staircase, returned to Benoist in the middle of the room.

"If I trouble you, dear madame," said he, "put me in a corner and think no more of me. Raymond has asked me to remain until his departure—he wants to shake my hand once more. It is childishness; but then we are such old friends."

"You do not trouble me, M. Benoist," said Mme. Montclar, "I am going to be seated in the arm chair with a footstool under my feet. There, that is well. Thanks. For I am a little fatigued; but I am also content, and joy keeps one up. And then I shall have plenty of time in which to rest. I will not rejoin Beaurand for a week."

"That is a long time," said Benoist, smiling, "you hardly leave your nephew except for manœuvres. What a mother you have been."

"It was necessary. The poor child. When my brother died, Raymond was twelve years old. What do you suppose would become of a child of that age if some one did not replace the parents that he had lost? At last he is married. I am now content."

"You love your niece very much, as Raymond has told me. She is charming."

"You don't know how charming she is. She is also an orphan. Her mother has been dead a dozen years—happily—I was about to say. If I only dared."

"Why?"

"She was a sad woman, an invalid, too, I think.

She did not love her daughter, and never paid any attention to her. A friend of mine took care of the child and raised her with her own children, and succeeded admirably. Raymond called at the house. At bottom, I think my friend had chosen Raymond for her elder daughter, and then my nephew was foolishly infatuated with Estelle, and they had to let him have her, whether or no. That caused the coolness between Mme. de Polrey and us. Well, it is too bad. What can I do? And I love Estelle more than I do all the little de Polreys, all, as many as there are. They are refined, but, with their gossip, they are regular poll-parrots in the room. However, our Estelle is a woman. She is true to de Beaurand."

"Enthusiast!" said Benoist, smiling.

"Enthusiast? So be it, always; all my life; which has given me no little pleasure," Mme. Montclar remarked, dreamily. All at once she arose.

"I must see how they are dressing her, that child, if you will permit it. I will return immediately."

She went out by the same door that her niece did, leaving Benoist to his meditations.

CHAPTER II.

Raymond stopped at the landing to give some orders; that done, he cast around him the glance of the satisfied master.

The rich hotel had preserved its freshness of colors and brilliant decorations, seldom attended with twenty years of repose, and they were softer to the eyes than when new. The great tapestries, preserved in the family during more than two hundred years, draping the marble walls, descended to the steps of the staircase, where they lay in sumptuous folds. The light came from above through a cupola surrounded by *balustres ajourés*, from which hung cloths, embroidered and bedizened with gold, the purple carpet was thrown into relief by the brilliant whiteness of the stone; great azalias filled all the vacant places; above the ballustrade great green palms crossed their leaves under the canopy of joy and glory. Two hours before, Raymond had passed through this wilderness of gaiety, conducting his young wife, dressed in original flowers; in a few minutes they would repass in simple traveling costumes, and at that thought the heart of the young man beat more loudly. The hour at which he led her into the old mansion of his father had been an hour of thanksgiving; but that upon which he would take her out with him would be a hundred times more joyous. With a little haste he succeeded in giving his instructions for the days to come, and called Michel, his *valet de chambre.*

"All is ready," said he. He was a man of forty, with a military bearing, in dress-coat and white cravat. "I lighted a little fire in your room, Captain, for it was not warm in comparison with the rest of the house."

"All right," said Raymond, absently.

"And the mail, Captain, is on the writing desk."

"Thanks. You may go into the dressing-room and wait for me there. I will be in in a moment. Say also that I am detained, if, by chance, madame should be ready before I."

With the dogged step of a man who is going to do some drudgery, Raymond went into his room.

It was one he had occupied ever since the death of his father had drawn near to him his Aunt Montclar, a widow without children. During the holidays of Saint Cyr he had passed many fine nights there, sleeping till eight o'clock in the morning in the great bed draped with sombre curtains, there in the alcove. It was a large room, a dark, massive writing-desk near the window, an enormous fireplace in which a large log was burning, did not make the room look narrow. Above the mantel was a large picture of General de Beaurand in place of a mirror. Every day and every evening when in Paris, Raymond greeted his father in look and in heart. The fine blonde face of his mother had been effaced from his memory, as photographs are sometimes weakened by the action of the light and the sun, and of which there remain but indistinct traces. But he always thought of his father, a little while ago living, superb, upon his yellow-chestnut horse, a short time since, dead, livid, extended upon a litter

of boughs, with a wound in his left side, a wound so singular that it was formerly spoken of not as an accident, but as a murder. On entering his room, Raymond looked at the portrait and thought of the wound. Strangely he missed his father more upon that day than any other. The *quasi-maladive* affection, which his memory had saved, made very painful that day when the dear souls were parted more than ever before from happiness. In the gray light of an afternoon in May the portrait seemed paler than usual.

Who could have killed his father? Revenge? Everybody in the country loved him. He was received on the ground of friendship in all the houses for five leagues around. Upon that fatal day he was alone hunting, having given to his hunting guard an order to take his dog and another with a beater. On returning they found the General, dead, near the same passage where they had left him, at the foot of a hedge near a fosse. The gun had exploded as M. de Beaurand jumped the hedge. Who could then have killed the General, and why?

Raymond shook off the importunate idea and returned to the desk. A large photograph of Estelle, placed behind the blotting case, well in the light, calm, sweet-looking, hands crossed, caught his eye. He looked at it with an affectionate consciousness.

"Dear one, dear one," he said, pressing his lips against the glass that covered it.

The cold contact was disagreeable to him. He took the photograph from the case and kissed it passionately, with a throbbing of the heart that had not stopped since morning. When he put it back

upon the table he saw a compact mass of cards, letters, and telegrams of all colors, sizes and forms.

"Oh, heavens," thought he, "and must I read all those."

At last, in order to relieve himself from the wearisome task he hopefully looked at his watch; but the watch gave him time to look over the correspondence. So many must be finished before he could be at liberty, afterwards—that afterwards contained for him a multitude of intoxicating pleasures. With a resigned hand he seized the first envelope that came, removed the letter and read patiently what it contained.

Regrets with an affectionate word, cards of indifference with nothing at all, offers of house furnishers, letters from domestics desirous of entering into the service of himself or of his wife; one after another Raymond removed from its envelope, read and classed the letters placing the useless upon one side and those that needed answers upon the other, with that promptitude and that method peculiar to men who value their time and their space. Twice, impatient to be done he looked at his watch, and seeing that he still had time he continued to work, trying to conquer the impatience and the foolish desire that seized him each moment. Besides, in all he had not used ten minutes. His valet entered and assured him that all was in order.

"I am coming, Michel," said Raymond without looking.

The door closed.

Still two cards, that was all. He arose. A letter, fallen to the foot of the desk, attracted his attention;

he picked it up, and looked at it with some surprise. It was a common envelope. The hand-writing of the address was irregular, like that of those who seldom write, it ascended toward the right hand corner.

"To Monsieur Raymond de Beaurand,
At his hôtel, on de Lille st.,
Paris."

"I do not like the looks of that letter," thought Raymond.

It resembled, however, in outward appearance, many of those which he had just read, coming from domestics out of employment; he opened it. The sheet of paper which it contained was covered with serrated lines of a miserable but resolved script; one could easily see that the writer had made a first draught and had copied it with persistence. Three pages were full, on the fourth were only a few words and a signature. Raymond remained standing and began to read.

After the first few lines he leaned upon a chair, with haggard eyes and a discomposed look. After a instant of waiting he seated himself, putting the paper upon the table, for his hand trembled, and he recommenced his reading with minute care. The words danced before him. He had to put a hand upon the paper and to follow the lines with his finger in order to not lose the place.

He read it twice then threw himself forward and thought.

What he thought must have been horrible, for the sweat stood out in great beads upon his forehead, and he did not think to wipe it away. He arose

sharply, opened the window, breathed full and deep, then returned and seated himself before the letter. More than once he sought to find in the lines a phrase which he re-read, then relapsed into meditation.

Michel, in the next room, made a noise with the toilet articles to draw his attention; once he even put his head through the half-open door. But his master's appearance so terrified him that he dared not say anything and retired, a prey to a deadly fear.

Raymond still thought; many times he made a brusque movement, like a man who had found the solution to a problem, then returned to the paper before him, and fell into an attitude of absolute dejection.

"What if I call Benoist?" he said to himself.

The impossibility of communicating to another that which he had learned was as clear as the light itself. He remained motionless. The traveling clock struck once; he looked at it, half past five; he had no time to lose if he wanted to catch the train. He arose undecidedly, unsteadily. All the energy of Captain de Beaurand had disappeared; there remained no more of him than a poor man who had fallen under a stroke that he could not have averted.

"Captain," Michael ventured, turning the handle of the door.

"Leave me," said Raymond in a choked voice.

"His eyes fell upon the letter; he took it, and, rolling it into a ball, he threw it into the fire-place, where it instantly burned. The ashes of the paper blackened and were drawn up the chimney with a few sparks. Raymond followed them, wavering all the time as though drunk.

The rustling of a robe of silk was heard in the corridor at the door; the voice of Estelle accompanied it.

"How about me, who was afraid of not being ready," said she, laughing.

"Raymond," said Mme. Montclar, knocking at the door, "you will miss the train."

"Let him alone, aunt, that would be so droll," said Estelle, gaily.

"I am coming," he answered in a strong voice.

Five minutes more and he closed the window.

The two women departed, laughing.

He had taken his customary attitude; standing, he was rigid as a corpse. With passionate vehemence he seized the photograph of Estelle and pressed it to his lips; but his lips had hardly touched it when he recoiled from it with horror, looking straight into the eyes of the picture he seemed to be addressing to it a mute adjuration; fascinated, he was about to kiss it again, when he shrank back with violence. He tore the picture in pieces, which he threw into the fireplace, where they blazed without his notice. He then opened his box of arms and took out the pistols, which he examined. They were in excellent condition and loaded. He took one of them, unloaded it and loaded it again, and he seized it with a firm hand and went toward the general. Without difficulty he discovered his own breast and looked at the picture of his father.

He looked at it a long time with eyes of tenderness and sadness. What did he say to it during those moments of mute contemplation? Was it a prayer, or only the expression of filial love exalted to the verge of insanity? At the moment when burning with fever the eyes of Raymond filled with tears; he put the muzzle of the pistol upon his heart and fell dead, the pistol in his hand.

CHAPTER III.

One cannot describe the stupefaction that followed. The first impression was that it could not be true, and that the whole house was being duped by a terrible hallucination.

Michel was the first to rush into the room; before the detonation had ceased he saw his Captain fall. Kneeling at his side he tried to put his hand on the captain's heart; but drew it back smeared with blood, and filled with a sickness that made him fall faint.

Mme. Montclar entered almost immediately, supposing there had been merely some slight fire-arm accident, trusting that it was nothing, with the confidence of those who are so happy that they cannot think of the brutality of an unmerited fortune.

At the sight of her nephew extended upon the floor, Mme. Montclar caught hold of the door post struck dumb. Estelle, who followed her, entered the room, took two or three steps and stopped, frightened at the terrible apparition of death that she saw for the first time. In her light costume of silver gray silk, dressed ready to go, flowers upon her hat and her umbrella in her hand, she was the very image of life and joy.

After the first movements of terror she approached him carefully and leaned over the body. At that moment her gown fell into the stream of blood that ran upon the floor.

"He is only wounded, speak, Michel," she said, in a low voice; "we must go for a surgeon."

The room was filled with frightened servants. Benoist came in, his presence immediately commanded order and silence.

Without waiting to discover life in the corpse at his feet, he picked Raymond up and placed him upon the bed. Michel, having recovered his senses, helped him. Two men were sent for two surgeons in different parts of the city, and the rest of the servants were sent about their work.

"Your master seems to be the victim of an accident," he said, in a cool voice; "it is nothing unusual. While you go about your duties we will see what can be done. While waiting for the physicians we need but be silent."

The tone of his voice had re-established confidence, the servants retired, almost convinced that the misfortune was purely accidental.

The door was closed and Benoist found himself with the two women and Michel before the corpse of his friend."

"He has only fainted, has he, Monsieur," said Mme. Montclar, who wished to hear good news.

Benoist shook his head sadly.

"You are both in a condition to listen to me," he said, "Raymond is dead. His fingers are already cold and becoming rigid. What it is necessary to know at present and to conceal, perhaps, is the cause of his death."

"An accident," said Mme. Montclar, wringing her hands, "without doubt it is only an accident, Monsieur Benoist. In his happiness he always was imprudent. He was beside himself for joy this morning when he went to the church. He said to

me, 'I am silly, dear aunt, absolutely silly, I am so happy.'"

Estelle said nothing but remained standing in the middle of the room, looking at her husband with deep eyes full of pity. Benoist looked at her astonished to find her so calm.

"And you, Madame," he said to her, "do you think it was an accident?"

She did not answer, not being accustomed to being called Madame. He took a step towards her.

"Madame de Beaurand," said he, "do you also believe that the death of your husband was due to an accident?"

"Certainly, Monsieur," she added; "what else could it be?"

She turned towards him. A nervous start made her gown shiver when she encountered his inquisitorial look, so sharp that it seemed that he would bore into her conscience.

The room sounded with a cry of woe. It was Madame Montclar, who, having recovered from her shock, approached the bed, and, touching the already cold hand of her nephew, had realized the horror of her fear. She fell upon her knees by his side, with sobs broken by words. The spectacle of the old lady, in her rich robe, in the attitude of despairing prayer, was heart-rending. Estelle approached her and clasped her in her arms; her beautiful face was marked with an unbounded commiseration.

"My aunt, my dear aunt," said she, in a low voice; "for love of him be patient, be silent."

"Oh!" cried Madame Montclar, "you comprehend nothing. You may speak of resignation, but

not to me, who have known him since he was born."

An expression of tolerance, of suffering, even of mortification, passed over Estelle's face; without being taken aback, she leaned over the old lady.

"Help me, Monsieur," said she to Benoist, who took Mme. Montclar by the other arm, and, between the two, they succeeded in placing her in a chair against the bed.

"You must take her away," said the young man to Mme. de Beaurand.

"You take her away, if she will consent to go," said Estelle, without looking at him. "My place is here—I am his wife."

Benoist threw at her such a look as goes to the bottom of the soul. She bore it tranquilly, a little astonished at such very inconsistent persistence.

"You are surprised to not see me cry," said she, with a haughty air. "I can never cry when I am seriously affected. Blessed are those who have the gift of tears."

She placed her hand caressingly upon the shoulder of Madame Montclar, with a soft tenderness which the poor woman felt, for she responded by pressing the compassionate hand, and then broke into tears.

Mme. de Beaurand remained standing before her aunt, when a servant announced the arrival of the doctor. Michel, who was seated in a chair near the window, and who had not made a movement nor uttered a sound from the time his master was placed on the bed, arose brusquely and approached the body.

The doctor was neither the one nor the other of

the noted surgeons for whom Benoist had sent. He was a doctor of minor degree, living in the quarter, caught by chance by one of the servants and sent in. He entered quietly, went to the bed, uncovered the wound where the blood had coagulated, made a few percussions, and, turning toward Benoist, said, in a low tone:

"The ball passed through the heart; death was instantaneous."

"I thank you, Monsieur," said Benoist, in a calm voice. "I suppose we must inform the police."

At this word both women regarded him with a look of repulsion, which is inspired by a like idea in people bred in the higher planes of society.

"Yes, Monsieur, certainly," said the doctor.

He had intended speaking of the marriage, about which the whole quarter had been excited since morning; not knowing positively, he much doubted that the young lady in pure gray was the young bride. He looked at her with a sort of stupefaction; she was very pale and very calm, and still had on pearl-gray gloves.

"Very well," said Benoist, laconically. "If you will come with me, we will go to the prefecture."

"But," said the doctor, "usually they go to the Commisaire of Police in the quarter."

"Well then, go there, Monsieur, and do your duty. As for me, I will try to see the Prefect of Police. The death of Captain de Beaurand was purely accidental, and they must be informed of it."

"Pardon me, Monsieur," said the doctor, "I do not believe that the death was accidental."

"Why so, Monsieur?" queried Benoist, in a proud manner.

"Because of the aspect of the wound. The muzzle of the pistol touched the shirt and a burn was very apparent. It was not an accident."

Benoist squeezed the arm of the doctor and said in an imposing voice:

"Upon bethinking yourself, you will change your opinion. I see the presence of these ladies disturbs you. Ladies, will you retire? It is necessary."

Madame Montclar arose with that peculiar submissiveness with which the higher classes bow to that which is convenient. Estelle passed her arm through that of the old lady, and took two steps toward the door.

"No, wait," said the aunt of the dead, "let me kiss him, my handsome Raymond, my beloved Raymond, my nephew, my son. Like his poor father, what fatality!"

She had thrown herself upon the bed and covered with kisses, the face yet warm, upon which rested super-human calmness.

"Enough, Madame," said Benoist, drawing her aside with a firm hand.

"And you, Estelle, you will not kiss him?" said Madame Montclar, sadly. "He was your husband, my child, your husband before God and man. Kiss him!"

Obediently, while her face became livid, the young woman leaned over Raymond and sealed a kiss upon his brow. It was the first he had ever received from her. It was the first time she had come close to him. An hour before, he who lay in the sleep of death would have thrilled under that light touch.

Estelle recoiled from him chilled with the coldness of death, then, reproaching herself for her feebleness, placed a second kiss upon the blanched face, as a tear fell upon the closed eyes.

Benoist watched her attentively. The doctor seemed surprised to see a woman show such *sang froid* under such circumstances. Estelle paid no attention to them, and drawing the hand of Madame Montclar through her arm, led her from the room.

When the doctor was alone with Benoist and Michel, he approached the corpse to make a complete examination. Theodore, with a gesture, stopped him.

"It is useless," said he, "you are right, but nobody, except us, and those who should know it, shall know the truth. To the people it shall pass as an accident, and it is for them that I desire you to go with me. Besides, it will avail nothing. I alone shall do what need be done. Michel, you will remain here, allow nobody to enter, touch nothing and arrange nothing."

"But what if the ladies wish to see the captain?" asked Michel, whose face had become haggard and dark.

"You will refuse; that is the order; you understand?"

"I understand," said the worthy fellow.

Benoist went out, followed by the doctor. When the sound of their footsteps had died out in the corridor, the old soldier left the bed and began an anxious and silent search through the room.

"It was the letter that caused the deed," he thought, as his temples throbbed with the excess of

contained emotion. "If I could only find it, that beggarly letter."

He did not search the envelopes which made a heap upon the writing desk; but obstinately worked over the pile which Raymond had prepared to answer. When he was assured that he could find nothing of the missing paper, he put them all back in their place and continued his search. He went to the fireplace and saw the pieces of Estelle's picture, which the fire had not entirely consumed. At sight of them, he was struck dumb, without thought or word. With almost unaccountable care, he took one, examined it and returned it to the exact place whence he took it. At that moment, one of the servants, called by Estelle to bring some fresh water to Mme. Montclar, entered the room, as though bewildered, and said to his comrade:

"Did you notice? The bride had blood on her robe."

CHAPTER IV.

In one of the large salons of the mansion transformed into a zealous chapel, reposed the body of Raymond de Beaurand, prepared for his last resting-place.

After all sorts of authentications, Michel had dressed his master in a new uniform, worn for the first time on that fateful morning, and they had laid him upon the bier. The handsome face of the young man was not troubled. The tear that was shed by Estelle had quickly dried upon the eyelid of the dead, who seemed to be sleeping peacefully, had it not been that the lips were tightly pressed together. The flowers placed everywhere on the occasion of the marriage, had been artistically arranged behind the catafalque in the form of a wall of verdure. All around they filled the room, leaving a small space in which to move. The candelabras, filled with burning candles, cast a golden light upon the purple carpets placed in the passage ways.

Benoist, who had superintended the whole arrangement, did not desire black hangings. Raymond would still pass some hours in the palace of his father, in the midst of the splendor of his nuptial glory.

A priest and two sisters of charity prayed over the deceased. Meanwhile, Benoist and Michel were closeted with M. André Bolvin, assistant procurer de la Republique, searching everywhere for the letter, mentioned by the *valet de chambre.* That letter

which had undoubtedly caused the death of his master, as he said.

They had gone over everything. It was sad to see the most secret drawers, the most sacred boxes opened by an unknown representative of the law. They found only family relics, old letters of General de Beaurand written to his wife, the correspondence of friends, some dead, some living—nothing, not a word, which could explain the strange suicide.

"The letter is in the pile," said Michel, for the tenth time, with a sort of rage.

"The Captain might have burned it, one can not tell what has become of it. After all," said André Bolvin, raising his clear, penetrating eyes over their heads, "what could have been in the letter?"

"I absolutely do not know; but when I saw my captain reading it I was frightened, for I never saw such a look on a human face. From that moment, I feared some misfortune. Ah! if I had done as I ought to have done, I should have remained in the room!"

"You know nobody who could have wished to have caused de Beaurand any sorrow or could have desired to have frightened him?"

"Nobody; you see he was like his father—everybody liked him."

"That did not prevent somebody's having killed him, though; or that he killed himself."

The young assistant looked attentive at Michel. In a few words Benoist related to him the tragical death of the General.

"Truly, it is singular," he said.

With a nervous hand he looked over the cards and

letters lying on the writing desk. All at once he seated himself and began to closely study the envelopes, placing them with their respective cards, identifying them, as nearly as possible by the handwriting.

Benoist watched him closely, aiding him when a difficulty presented itself, and accounting for the letters, the authors all of which he knew or at least knew the name. This work ended, one envelope remained upon the table.

"This is the envelope," said the deputy.

"I hardly hoped to find the letter there."

Benoist looked at the envelope with a singular emotion. That common piece of paper contained the message of death. And he had no idea of where to find the letter.

"There is evidently a woman in the case," said Bolvin, turning the envelope over.

"A woman? I don't believe it; I know the life of my friend, and that seems impossible."

"There are many ways in which a woman may be involved," said the deputy, without moving. "I did not say that it was the revenge of one whom he had deserted, you understand me, but if there should not be a woman at the bottom of this matter, it will be very singular. Did your friend know anybody at Laval?"

"At Laval," said Benoist, searching his memory. "No, I do not think so."

"Has he been stationed at that town?"

"No sir," said Michel, distinctly.

"Did the Beaurands have any servants there; any whatever? Are there none of the domestics of this

house who have relations there? The letter bears the post mark of Laval; but then it might have been sent there from Paris and thence here; however, it was posted at Laval. These letters arrive post-haste, and that makes tracing them very difficult. It then becomes necessary to know if those who immediately surround the family have not relations at Laval. You will make it your business to find that out, Michel."

The young magistrate remained silent for a moment. The large room was very dark, notwithstanding the two or three lamps placed upon the stands to light the corners.

"Michel, you will leave us," said M. Bolvin. The servant obeyed, going out silently.

"Monsieur," said the deputy to Benoist, who was seated in front of him, "can you tell me what was M. de Beaurand's attitude toward his wife?"

From the moment that he was certain of the death of his friend, Benoist had not ceased to think of that same question and to wonder what import his answer should have. In presence of a direct question, he, in his turn, looked at the man that put the question, and decided that he was an honest man.

"His sentiments were of the warmest tenderness," said he, without hesitating.

"You are sure of it?"

"Absolutely certain, for we were talking about it not more than a half-hour before the misfortune."

"Then he spoke of it to you?"

"In an extraordinary way."

"How, then, can you explain the fact that the torn

picture of Mme. de Beaurand was found in the ashes?" said Bolvin, examining the remains of the photograph, which he had picked up and put away.

"I can not explain it," said Benoist, honestly.

A silence followed; the deputy looked from the pieces of the photograph to the envelope alternately, as though by confronting them he hoped to make them speak.

"And Mme. de Beaurand: Can you tell me how she felt toward her husband?"

Benoist did not answer immediately; that which he was about to say was of such gravity that he wished to know its whole effect before saying one word.

"Do you desire to say nothing?" said Bolvin, in a tone which cut Benoist like the stroke of a knife.

"No; I was only trying to find out how I could explain it to you so that you might have an exact idea. I do not know how I can do it better than to relate to you my last conversation with Raymond; you will be better able to judge from that than from my own personal idea of it."

Followed by the closest attention of the magistrate, he then related their conversation exactly.

"You will say that my friend, enamored as he was of his wife, was not deluded in regard to the affection she had for him; but he thought her good, good as goodness itself, and it was on account of that goodness that he gained the consent of Mme. de Beaurand, who had very much friendship for him."

"How was she to him toward the last?"

"I saw her little until to-day. She was affection-

ate and gay, very calm. All in all, she seemed happy in being married."

"Mme. de Beaurand was Miss Brunaire? Family good? Her parents?"

"The father has been dead since the birth of his daughter, the mother survived him eight years."

"An orphan, then; schooled in a convent, by the kindness of a friend? I heard that. It was not then a money marriage?"

"Neither on one side nor the other."

"How old was Mme. de Beaurand?"

"A little more than twenty."

The deputy reflected.

"And she, she knows no one at Laval?"

"I don't know," said Benoist.

"Will you ask her to come here? I would go to her, except that on account of Mme. Montclar I think it preferable."

Benoist went out by the door leading into the corridor and asked of the first servant where he might find Mme. de Beaurand. He was told that she was in the chapel of prayer. So there he went. The great clock of the palace struck eleven. The priests and the two sisters of charity prayed all the time. One might have followed the psalms by the movement of their lips. A short distance from them upon a *prie-dieu*, fixed for the occasion, Estelle knelt, dressed in an indoor gown of pure white, because she had no dress of black in the hôtel, with hands joined. With an expression of anxious interrogation, she looked at the corpse of him who was her husband only before the world. Why was he there, when he should have been with

her in a nest prepared for them? A tearful tenderness came to her lips and showed in her eyes as she saw there, him whom she had accepted as her husband with the full hope of being happy, with a deeply sincere intention of returning to him love for love, just at the moment when his soul closed and he had become happy. "It was not my fault," said she to herself, "if I never really loved him. I could not; he was to me a very dear friend; I do not know that he could ever have become a beloved friend. One may be good, affectionate and true to one's husband without showing passion for him. Doubtless, I do not know how to be passionate, but I am sure, however, that I could have made his a life of happiness."

The deadened sound of the footsteps of Benoist roused her from her revery. They had disturbed Mme. Montclar a dozen times to ask her desires, but she was so overwhelmed that she could not answer.

"Will you come with me a moment, Madame," said Benoist, in a low tone.

She rose and followed him with a sort of repugnance; the way in which he had examined her over the body, had made a disagreeable impression upon her. As he guided her through the corridor, she stopped.

"Are we going into that room?" she asked.

"Yes, the deputy wishes to make a few inquiries."

"Very well," said she, tranquilly.

She entered; Bolvin, immediately struck with her beauty, her distinction, her supreme elegance, bowed respectfully to her. She stood erect without noticing the chair which he offered her; thus obliging him to stand also.

"I beg pardon, Madame," said he, "I have only a word to say to you. Do you know, far or near, high or low in the social world, anybody who lives, or has parents or friends who live, at Laval?"

"Laval?"

"Yes, or in the environments; think well."

Estelle bowed her head, searching her memory scrupulously. Then looked Bolvin full in the face and said:

"No, sir; I know nobody in that district. I have never been there."

"Very well, Madame, that is all," said the deputy, saluting her.

She went out with her head bowed. When she had left the room Bolvin looked at Benoist and said: "The letter which has caused the suicide was undoubtedly a denunciation of Mme. de Beaurand.

"A denunciation—a calumny." said Benoist.

"I think so," said Bolvin, coolly.

CHAPTER V.

All of Paris, that had assisted on the afternoon of the nuptial ceremony, learned upon rising, the next morning, of the death of Captain de Beaurand. A large morning journal informed of the accident immediately, gave an account of it to its readers upon the first page. Theodore Benoist had thought of many things, but he had not thought to close the mouths of a dozen servants and as many more subalterns belonging to as many different professions. The effect of this indiscretion was disastrous. Beaurand, married in the morning, died during the day? The simple explanation of a simple accident could satisfy nobody. It was too simple. And then, besides, what need was there of a young husband playing with fire-arms? On all sides interested and curious they ran to the hôtel de Beaurand.

The most positive orders had been given that nobody should be allowed to see Mme. Montclar or the young widow; but certain people passed all the barriers and forced all consigns with an inexplicable ease. At the moment when Estelle had come from her modiste who had been called to make the mourning costume late in the evening previous, the Baroness de Polrey came to her, followed by a servant whom she had easily seduced by her assurance.

"I thought that your orders did not include me, my dear Estelle," said she, with a wounded air very strange upon the face of a happy, wordly woman. "You could not, under such circumstances, refuse to see the friend who replaced your mother."

"Certainly, dear Madame," said the young woman, a little coldly; "I thank you for the solicitude you have shown."

Mme. de Polrey looked at her curiously, as one would examine something odd. This bride of the evening, widow before being a wife, was destined to become the subject for common conversation during a week or more; what honor to be able to say, "It is I who saw her first;" all at once she remembered that the pretext of her visit had a maternal interest, and she opened her arms:

"My dear child," said she, "what a horrible situation this is for you. In this house where you are actually a stranger, you must have need of a friend to whom you can open your heart? Kiss me, my darling."

But the darling did not seem the least bit in the world to display any effusion; she, however, kissed Mme. de Polrey with mere convenient recognition, and seeing that she did not defer to it, she offered her a chair.

"Is this your room?" said the Baroness, shading her eyes with her hand and looking round her. "It is nice, very nice, a little sombre these tapestries—as for me, I have a room in blue and gold, but I am a blonde. Let us see, Estelle, tell me how did it happen? You know you may place all your confidence in me, I am as mute as a tomb. Were you present? Poor child, how you must suffer."

"I was not there," answered Estelle, decisively.

Since the evening before, she had learned that she should speak as little as possible. Her short interview with the deputy had aroused in her ideas of

prudence, the existence of which she had never suspected.

"He was alone then?" queried Mme. de Polrey; "the poor fellow! But then, why did he touch the pistols? What imprudence, and then, don't you think, between us, that an officer ought to know the danger of such arms enough to avoid them? Don't you think so? tell me."

"I know absolutely nothing," answered Estelle, with a little petulence. "I can not think of such things. I know only one thing, and that is, that we were married yesterday at one o'clock in the afternoon, and that before six o'clock in the evening, I was a widow; that is enough to shatter the most robust nerves. I tell you, my dear Madame, that I am absolutely broken down."

"I understand that," said the Baroness, without moving, "my poor dear. Have you been able to cry, at all?"

"When I have much sorrow," said Estelle, "I am unable to cry."

"Your eyes are, however, very hollow. It is terrible, and what did Mme. Montclar say about it?"

"She is overwhelmed. I am afraid that she will never recover. Happily there is a friend of Raymond who has charge of all."

"That is fortunate, truly. Only two women—what could they do?—great heavens! What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I will have to have time in which to reflect."

"No doubt, no doubt. Anyway, will you remain here in the hôtel while waiting?"

"Evidently," said Estelle, who did not understand; "is it not my house?"

"Ah!" said Mme. de Polrey, with a sigh, half hopeful and half disappointed; "then you have decided the question?"

"For the present, absolutely."

"I came to ask you," said the Baroness, with a great liberality of mind, "if you would not return to our house and take, there, the same room that you had when you were a young girl? But then you're decided."

Estelle looked her straight in her eyes and pierced her to the bottom of her soul. Before that day she had judged the Baroness and found her terribly hollow, except in that which concerned her maternal kindness; it was from this remaining part that they had called her a good woman.

Upon the death of Mme. Brunaire, Mme. de Polrey was charged with raising Estelle. Why the Baroness more than anyone else? No particular friendship had united her with the deceased, who, besides during several years cared for nobody and seemed to be detached from the world by a sort of sad monomania. Mme. de Polrey had obtained charge of Estelle for the simple reason that she had asked it; the tutor of the orphan, pleased with not being obliged to occupy herself with the child, discharged the pupil upon the amiable woman, the wife of a worthy man, enemy to all care, mother to three little girls, and who was probably an ample guarantee for competency in the matter of education.

The agreement between Estelle and her, who, to use an admissible phrase, took the place of her

mother, had been very simple. Mme. de Polrey claimed neither recognition nor particular attention; but only the amiable politeness which constitutes social relations. In her family, Estelle gave her no more trouble than one more turtle dove in her dove cote; all the little people were sent to the convent, were visited in the parlor, went out regularly and returned for their holidays with a smiling discipline which was no cause for ennui. When the time came to present the young girls, Mme. de Polrey was shown a little deception. Certainly Susan, her eldest daughter, was more fashionably pretty, and Odette, the second, possessed an extraordinary "chic;" as to Valentine—she was fourteen years old; there was no question about all this. But Estelle, besides her unusual name which attracted attention to her, had a queenly appearance, her commanding beauty was so apparent that her companions found themselves thrown relatively into the shade. This was the commencement of the sorrows of Mme. de Polrey and of her becoming undeceived with regard to her pupil. This vexatious spirit lasted for two years without outward manifestation, then came the question with regard to Raymond. The Baroness suffered from it without showing her discomfiture; but Estelle understood that she herself was very wrong to engross the attentions of a heart intended for Susan and without resenting the least ill-humor, she said to herself, that Mme. de Polrey was after all only mortal and not a guardian angel, as they had both said in good faith, in times already past.

The question was now very neatly put: The Baroness had not made her proposition until after

she had learned with certitude that it would be unacceptable. It was very wise and absolutely maternal having shown the many inconveniences which would be thrown in the way of her ex-pupil. The young widow found herself wounded. If, by chance, she had found it necessary to have an asylum under such circumstances, could she not have found it there? Estelle was not far enough advanced in life to understand a very natural excess of maternal prudence; her young heart and also her own self-esteem had received a cutting wound. She did not know or wish to hide it, and the Baroness, who was clever, discovered it immediately. From that moment there was no true affection between these two women, if it had so much as ever existed. All this occurred in less than half a minute.

"I will remain here," said Mme. de Beaurand, "since Mme. Montclar, my aunt—she emphasized that word—will have immediate need for care and kindness, besides my mourning gown will keep me out of society for two years."

"That is to say, to remain with Mme. Montclar is what you desire to do," said the Baroness, slowly, a little piqued; "and, besides, under these circumstances, which are so trying, her protection may be quite necessary."

"Her protection?" asked Estelle, straightening up. "Her friendship were better."

"Call it what you please, my dear; it is certain that the wife of a man who died suddenly by a pistol shot upon the day of his wedding, has need of a stable chaperon, more for the future than for the present. You are in a pitiable situation, my dear."

Estelle blushed as though under a direct affront, notwithstanding that Mme. de Polrey was right; however, in her manner of speaking, she had missed her footing, slightly.

"My situation is difficult, I understand that," said the young woman, "and, moreover, I count upon my friends to uphold me."

"Certainly, my child, we will all be ready to sustain you and to defend you."

The eyes of Estelle shot fire, and she could not contain herself.

"To defend me?" said she, "heavens! and against whom?"

"Against the malicious public, my dear child. You are intelligent, Estelle; do you doubt that your premature widowhood will be the subject of a thousand comments? Nobody will believe that that accident" —

"It is very simple," said Estelle, with bitterness.

"It is too simple! Do you want to know the truth? I heard it said already twice this morning, and it is not yet eleven o'clock. Listen, Estelle, I replaced your mother, and, well, I tell you, that if a like thing had happened to one of my daughters, I wouldn't have enough eyes to weep with."

"You needn't presume that it is anything serious," said Mme. de Beaurand, "and I am happy to be so situated to-day as to cause you no chagrin."

"My dear child," commenced Mme. de Polrey, who repented of having gone so far, for she was not cruel, but only imprudent in her language, like about three-fourths of us mortals are. She stopped upon seeing that Estelle was not disposed to accept her

advice nor explanations, and arose to go. "Is the hour of the ceremony fixed?" she asked. "I suppose it will be to-day?"

"Yes, I think so. M. Theodore Benoist has charge of these things. Gracious! but these details are horrible!"

"You have had ample opportunity to discover that they are," added Mme. de Polrey, upon the threshold.

"Raymond asked him to remain"——

Upon seeing the expression which these words brought to the face of the baroness, Estelle regretted having spoken.

"Since all is wrongly interpreted," thought she, "I will say nothing to anyone." "*Au revoir, chère Madame*, and I thank you," she added, in a full tone, as Mme. de Polrey disappeared down the stairway.

CHAPTER VI.

The church of St. Thomas Aquinas was too small to hold the crowd that came to attend the obsequies of Captain de Beaurand. The magnificent catafalque, the many crowns of flowers, the lampadaires with green flames, which filled the narrow nave where, twenty-four hours before, Estelle and Raymond had vowed to remain together until death did them part, occupied more room than did the two upon their *prie-dieu* of red velvet, and, moreover, now the husband was alone.

Benoist, with a truly remarkable tact in organization, had discovered an old relation of the family, near enough to lead the mourners, and yet distant enough to be perfectly indifferent; this person of noble appearance and of little excitability was installed in the place of honor, and conducted himself with the air of one whom nothing could astonish, and to whom fortune was at the end of all fluctuation. It was before him that the eighteen hundred persons filed, who had come in order to be able to say, "I was there," and also to assure themselves that the young widow, following her own convenience, had remained at home.

Estelle had acted according to the best rules, and there were many who criticized her for it; let us, however, do them the justice of saying that had she been there she would have been criticized by the same persons and in exactly the same manner.

"She should at least have been able to accompany

her husband to the church; it does not trouble her the least in the world. She owed him that, however."

"She did not come out at all," said the others. "That is very singular. Were I in her place — "

One can not imagine the many contradictory things that they would have done had they been in her place.

The body of Raymond was interred under the sumptuous family monument at Père-Lachaise, and Benoist, when all was done, returned to the hôtel de Beaurand to inform Mme. Montclar of all that had passed.

Mme. Montclar was one of those women who, having a sad youth, enjoy afterward a long period of peaceful happiness; there shown from the tranquil years a soft light that illuminated all the rest of her life, and that made it singularly easy to accept old age. A widow while yet young, without children, as rich as she could desire, Mme. Montclar had arrived at forty without great sorrow; at that time the tragical end of her brother de Beaurand threw her into great melancholy. The love which she had avowed for little Raymond and the care for his education had occupied her; since then she had descended life easily, not finding the steps steep, feeling assured that she should feel herself sustained until the end by the tender heart and robust and strong hand of the nephew of whom she had made a son. This accident, from which the people would make nothing but a scandal, ruined, for her, the rest of her life. However, her health and practical nature furnished her with the necessary energy to

recover from her dejection. They had taken her away at the time of the funeral ceremony. When she was dressed in mourning, she wished to go and pray before the coffin of Raymond in the sanctuary; but Estelle told her that he was no longer there. Disposed at first to protest against the usurpation of her rights, Mme. Montclar at last acceded to the soft entreaties of Estelle, who, taking her arm, assured her that it was better so. "We know where to find him, my dear aunt," she said to her, "and there we shall not be a spectacle for the curiosity of the people."

It was so true that Madame Montclar pressed silently the hand of her niece, and led her to her own private apartment where they found Theodore Benoist.

After he had told them the details of the ceremony, he remained silent, and the silence rested heavily upon them. Estelle felt that he desired her to leave the room, that he might have occasion to say to Mme. Montclar, something that he desired to hide from her, and as she considered the pretension insolent, she resolved to remain, come what might. Since the accident, Estelle had asked herself many questions, beside that which took precedence above all others, why did Raymond kill himself? Many others disquieted her constantly; primary among them was, whence came this singular attitude of Benoist in caring for her? He was the last to have talked confidentially with the Captain. What could he have said to the unfortunate one so near to his end, in that last conversation? If any one had the key to the enigma, Estelle thought that one must be

Benoist. Was there then a mysterious link between the obvious coldness of this young man and the unexpected death of her husband? Was it Benoist who had revealed to Raymond some horrible mystery or had Raymond before dying confided to his friend an inviolable secret? The words of the deputy had impressed the young man with an indelible idea; the idea that Raymond died of a denunciation of his wife, that had, little by little, taken control of him.

The truth is that hypothesis cleared up all that was otherwise obscure. But then, whence did he derive his faith? what documents? what overwhelming proof did that letter, which had disappeared, contain that Raymond had not taken time to verify that which it revealed to him and had not doubted it for a single instant? What mystery could be hidden in the apparently transparent life of Estelle? What was the secret concealed by that beautiful undecipherable face?

Undecipherable, it had never been and was not at that time when it watched with an unquiet curiosity, trying to pierce the mask of coldness with which Benoist tried to disguise his own anxiety to know. And the young man deceived himself, little by little, by taking that disquietude for the manifestation of a troubled conscience. The trouble which weighed upon them at that hostile waiting, won Mme. Montclar, for to dissipate it she posed resolutely at Benoist the question which burned upon the lips of Estelle.

"Have you heard anything said upon the subject of this fatal accident?"

Benoist, before answering, looked at Estelle. She neither blushed nor turned pale. She awaited the answer with lips slightly open, with body leaning a little forward in the attitude of attention. He resolved to inform these two women of the motive which, according to his presumption, had caused Raymond to commit suicide.

"They say a great many things," said he, measuring his words. "They refuse absolutely to believe it to have been an accident."

"What do they suppose?" asked Mme. Montclar, carrying her handkerchief to her lips by a nervous movement; "we ought to know, we are completely in the dark."

"Not entirely, my dear Madame."

They looked at him with a movement of attention.

"It is proved now, proved in a certain way, that Raymond found in his mail a letter which he read over a great many times and which was the determining cause of his fatal resolution."

"A letter," said Mme. Montclar. "Where is it, what did it contain?"

"We know nothing of it. The letter has disappeared. Raymond, no doubt, burned it, with other papers, perhaps."

He looked at Estelle who listened to him with eyes fixed upon him with an intense interest.

"A letter! Kill himself for a letter! Is it possible! The poor child must have lost his head!"

"That is what we think," said Benoist.

"We, who is that?"

"The deputy who had charge of the inquest and I."

"Was there an inquest," asked Mme. Montclar with an expression of horror; "an inquest in this house so honorable and so respected?"

"It was necessary. Re-assure yourself, my dear lady. The secret is as well guarded as possible, but it was necessary that the cause of the death of Raymond should be known, and, if possible, avenged."

"Yes, you are right, but the inquest—justice here is very harsh, at least, since that is necessary."

"Was it for that that I was interrogated?" asked Estelle in a brave voice.

"Precisely, Madame. There were indications that made us suppose that the author of that letter had relations at Laval."

"Raymond knew nobody in that town," said Mme. Montclar, again thrown into her dejection. "Is there no garrison there?

"Yes; researches are now being made on that point."

Benoist did not look from the face of Estelle.

"What do you think," said she, "was the subject of that letter? You have some idea or opinion of what it contained?"

The young man hesitated an instant; the *sang froid* of Estelle exasperated him.

"We believe," said he, "that it contained a revelation, true or false, of facts such that ——"

"An anonymous letter?"

"It is not probable. Raymond would have put no confidence in an anonymous letter."

"What could it have said?" cried Mme. Montclar, with some excitement. "Our family is, thank

Heaven, without stain. If there had been anything I would not have spoken of a stain, but only of a libel upon the house; but no, we are as white as ermine, upon the side of the de Beaurands, as also upon that of the Vernons, from which came the wife of my brother. The Brunaires are equally without reproach."

"Ah, then you have thought of it," said the look of Benoist so clearly that she stopped short.

"My poor dear," said she, arising and seizing Estelle in her arms, "I hope they shall not be able to sully your character by their suppositions. You or yours———"

"I hope so too," said Estelle, passing an arm around the waist of Mme. Montclar and looking at Benoist at the same time with a haughty air that struck him full in the face. "Is it I, Monsieur, whom they accuse of having taken some part in the death of my husband?"

"Not yet," said he, returning to her, defiance for defiance.

"M. Benoist, answer me," said Mme. Montclar, "does any one attack my niece?"

"Not yet, Madame, as I have the honor of speaking to you at this moment."

"But will they attack her?"

"It is probable. Many persons know already that there was a letter. It is not I who have told them, I assure you. They tried to find out what the letter contained, and there is not much difference among their outrageous suppositions."

Estelle thought, "yesterday, Mme. de Polrey, who was my friend; to-day, this man whom I do not know——"

"Monsieur," said she aloud, "have I committed some injustice, some wrong without knowing it? Have I offended somebody? What interest can those people, whom I do not know, have in destroying the reputation of a woman?"

"I do not know, Madame, as I have already had the honor of saying to you. I would have wished to have averted it, but it seems necessary to me, having given my friendship to Raymond and also my respect to all who bear his name."

"Don't you fear anything, my daughter," said Mme. Montclar, "if they do accuse you, it is I who will defend you. Your sorrow is great enough without adding calumny to it. No one will dare to say anything when they see that I sustain your honor by my own. Kiss me, my niece, and pick up courage. I will defend you, and, if need be, will avenge you. Is it not so, M. Benoist?"

She bowed silently. Estelle's eyes rested upon his for an instant; they said: "What have I done to you that you should be my enemy?"

The look of Benoist answered her: "Why was your photograph torn and in the ashes?"

But she did not understand, because she had not seen it.

CHAPTER VII.

Seated easily in a chair before the little writing-desk in her bed-chamber, Estelle thought. She had seated herself to write to some one, to tell her sorrow and ask for sympathy, and at the moment when she was about to draw out her blotting case, she had realized that she had no one to whom she could write.

In our society the young girl is not allowed to have anything to say in regard to her own life; she only participates in that of her parents, neither receiving nor making visits with her mother, except, perhaps, she has friends who are intimate with the family, and, more than all others, an orphan finds herself isolated if some mishap deprives her of the sociability of her immediate surroundings.

Estelle, who never really had any other relations than those with the Baroness de Polrey, suddenly became aware of the fact that she was absolutely alone in the world. Not a woman to whom she could explain her suffering, not a man on whom she could count for support. Mme. Montclar had adopted her in advance because she was going to become the wife of her nephew, very soon her beautiful daughter—but that friendship was of very recent date; had not the occurrences changed it any? Not one person to whom she could tell her sorrow, could it be true! Mme. Montclar was the woman with whom it was the most possible to speak openly of the things which tormented the young widow. How could she touch upon even the important ques-

tions which enveloped the tragic mystery? Never before had Estelle felt the need of a support. Her sad childhood near a sick and pre-occupied mother had accustomed her for a long time to seek for no resources except in herself. An easy temper completed by a smiling resignation formed the basis of that happy nature. At the convent she was amused at everything, having taken a taste for everything, even to her studies, and she showed herself to be a good comrade without the chilly exclusiveness which makes one friends; of the kind that become very popular among her companions, she had formed none of those liaisons of youth which play such a rôle in the opening of life. The Mlles. de Polrey were not firm enough to inspire in her any warm sentiments.

The young girls among whom Estelle was the eldest had appeared together in the social world and at the same time they were amused at that which seemed comical to them; but there was nothing profound in that babbling stream rolling over the pebbles.

Mlle. Brunaire felt that once married the three companions would take very different routes in which they would have no opportunity of meeting. The Mlles. de Polrey took life from the point of view of a cotillion, well directed, and assured themselves that they could not fail having good partners. Estelle wished for something a little more earnest; she wished a husband whom alone she could respect until death. She had almost found her ideal in Raymond de Beaurand, almost, for esteem had come immediately with a great and warm sympathy, love

only was lacking. Estelle hoped that that would come very soon. However, it was not without a certain internal distaste that she accepted marrying. "She will pray," said Valentine de Polrey contemptuously.

Such an idea never entered the head of Estelle. It seemed to her dangerous to marry a man whom she was not certain of some day loving, and whom, consequently, she could not hope, in advance, of loving alone and forever. It was that which she had told very frankly to Mme. Montclar when that lady came to ask her to consent. The old lady approved the delicacy of the scruple; but as there was not likely to occur a like occasion, she had thrown aside the objection of an innocent and proud soul.

"You have a good heart, my dear child, for not loving a soul that you esteem and which has for you such a tender passion."

Estelle thereupon consented. At that time when in the room prepared for the young couple she descended to the bottom of her heart with an unpitying precision, she reproached herself bitterly for allowing herself to have been won over and for not having firmly refused.

It was not merely on account of an egoistic desire that the young woman abandoned herself to this regret; a vague fear, inspired by the words of Theodore Benoist troubled her deeply. She was sure of being without reproach; but then, how was it that an accusation had been made so strongly against her that Raymond himself would rather die than speak of it to her? If it had been thus, would it not have been a hundred times better for Raymond himself to

have inflicted upon that vicious man the chagrin of a denunciation? Would they have dared to calumniate to that degree any other than an orphan, alone, notwithstanding her apparent surroundings?

"He would have lived, without doubt, had I not become his wife," thought Estelle, sadly. A natural return to herself made her add, "And I should not have been plunged into such an abyss of dangers and sorrows."

Truly she was alone. Nothing of her previous life had followed her to the de Beaurand mansion; the few dear and familiar objects that she had brought with her had been sent to the country, where she was to pass the summer with her husband. Besides, had not the smallness of their number called to her lips a smile, half of pity, half of sadness, when she saw them going away?

"I have always lived in a flying camp," said she once to Mme. Montclar; "at the convent I was a pupil who desired to do nothing but go; in the house of Mme. de Polrey I waited for my marriage—I thought that Beaurand would be a permanent home."

Estelle could imagine herself, at a more or less distant time, wandering about Europe, living at the hotels of the principal cities, always alone; the mere idea of seeing herself surrounded by interested flatterers, artificial women, disguised mendicants, like so many of the others, rich in possessions and poor in friends, inspired in her a true horror.

Had she any enemies? How could a reasonable young woman, without pronounced opinions, living in the same way that all the rest of the world lived,

have made an enemy so powerful, with a desire to produce such a terrible result?

The idea of calumny finds us always, when we first realize it, disarmed and with consternation. The first feeling is not of indignation, but of stupor. "How could anybody have hated me so much?" is the first reflection of a good and just being. It seems impossible; one thinks they could not have intended it, and that the error will be perceived and all the reparation possible made; it takes time for one to realize that it was for one's self, indeed, that it was intended.

Estelle was yet at that period of stupor. Another idea began to develop in her slightly over-excited mind: "Why did not Raymond come to me loyally and speak to me about it? I could so easily have proved the inanity of the calumny."

Little by little the one thought dominated over the other. Raymond was good and honest; she had never seen any manifestations of unreasonable anger or of ridiculous credulity in him; then how could he have worked with such precipitation? A stroke of madness, could it be? But a stroke that could not have been foreseen, was that reasonable?

Estelle determined to question Mme. Montclar with regard to it. The manner in which she had answered the questions of M. Benoist was a guaranty for the estimation that the excellent woman had of him; delicate and dangerous as the undertaking was, it was necessary. For the honor of Estelle it was necessary that the character of Raymond should be better known than merely that of a fiancé. She closed her writing-desk and asked if Mme. Montclar was ready to receive her.

Mme. Montclar responded by going herself to see the young widow in her own apartments.

In her terrible despair, solitude perhaps more than anything else weighed upon the poor woman.

During the last few days the hubbub of a large house filled with workmen, the coming and the going necessary to the preparations for a great wedding, filled her mind and her ears; the heavy silence which had fallen upon the house of mourning and crushed to nothingness material life, could not do otherwise than cast down the two lonely women together in a sorrow which they knew they could not betray to the world; it seemed to Mme Montclar as an odious covering, something like a garment imposed upon her soul by sheer force and she had a great desire to rid herself of it.

"You wish to speak to me?" she said, accosting Estelle.

"The young woman seated herself easily in a chair before answering. Many times had she seen Raymond thus employ himself to the pleasure of his aunt, and it seemed very natural to thus replace him. This tender attention drew to the eyes of Mme Montclar tears which were quickly wiped away.

"Pardon me, my dear aunt," said Estelle, "for a question that to you may seem to be in a great degree presumptuous; but in the situation in which we now are, do you not find it just and reasonable to take all possible means at hand to clear up the obscurity that envelopes us?"

"Speak," said Mme. Montclar.

"Have you ever noticed any flightiness in your

nephew, any singularity that would warrant you in attributing his last act to over mental excitement?"

"Never," answered the old lady with firmness. "Raymond had one of the best of balanced minds and was one of the most reasonable people you could meet. His only weak point, if such a holy sentiment could be called weak, was an extremely lively sensibility to all that had any bearing upon his father, whose tragic and premature death had violently impressed him. As for the rest, he had the most sensible of heads and calmest of minds."

"His father," said Estelle, "I never thought of that. Is it not possible that the letter had some bearing upon some act in the life of his father?"

Mme. Montclar straightened up, her face on fire and her right hand raised with animation unusual for her.

"I tell you I could swear," she said, "that there was nothing in the life of my brother that would offer even a pretext for a dishonorable accusation, not one thing at any time."

"But, my dear aunt, calumny needs no pretext."

"Then Raymond would have lived to discover the infamous calumniator and to kill him after having denounced him. No, no, my niece, that supposition is not admissible."

"Then," said Estelle, in a calm voice, "I renounce it. Aunt, you have lost a nephew who was a son to you, but I, I have lost all—without parents, without friends—as you have had ample proof, for I received cards, but not a word that bore me any affection. Raymond would have replaced all the rest to me. I came to him in full confidence, he has left me with-

out saying one word of adieu, and I am a thousand times more alone than upon the eve of my marriage. If he had died upon the eve, my dear aunt, the whole world would have found tears for me in my misfortune; but now I see around me only coldness, hostility and enmity. Pardon me, then, for trying to find a cause for this horrible catastrophe which has deprived me of all happiness, and which menaces even my honor."

She had spoken with great simplicity. Meanwhile tears nearly filled her eyes. Very much affected Mme. Montclar arose, took Estelle in her arms and kissed her forehead with tenderness.

"My child," said she to her, "have confidence in me, we will search together."

CHAPTER VIII.

"You have found nothing?" asked André Bolvin, upon seeing Benoist enter, whose card he had just received.

"Absolutely nothing. I came to find out if you do not think we were deceived after all, I think we shall have to search elsewhere."

"Elsewhere, I have searched," answered the young deputy. "They have been searching in the province, above all, where M. de Beaurand had relations or comrades. They have searched in regiments, among the men who were under the orders of the Captain, and who might have been near him. They have discovered not the least indications which can give us a clue."

"Did they find nothing that would confirm you in your ideas?" insisted Theodore.

He felt himself to be in a peculiar state of mind; his reason, his sentiment of honor, his respect for the wife revolted at the thought that Madame de Beaurand could have had, far or near, any relations with the death of her husband; but, however, a bizarre distrust, purely instinctive, arose in him when he saw her so calm in appearance, near the warm body of the man whom she had just married. It, however, bore no weight toward giving a clue to the author of the letter, and in assuring him that his suspicions were but foolishness. At the same time, he had a strong desire to receive the certitude that he had not been deceived. Doubt was agonizing,

he would come out of it at any price, in some way or other, and it was precisely that which he did not know how to do.

"Nothing has proved to you that that letter contained what you supposed?" asked Benoist, seeing that Bolvin had not responded to his question.

"Frankly, no," answered the young magistrate, looking with a pre-occupied air at the white paper spread before him. "No; but I can not recover from the impression which the extraordinary calmness of Madame de Beaurand made upon me. It was so unnatural."

"She is a person who has very much control over herself," Theodore observed, with some irritation.

"Evidently."

Bolvin began to whirl an ivory paper knife, whose evolutions disturbed his interlocutor very much. All at once he placed upon the table the disturbing object.

"You see," said he, "there are some things which, when once read or heard, haunt one, and of which one can not be divested. When Henry IV. was assassinated—pardon me for this slight historical pedantry—there was a contemporary who wrote about Marie de Medicis, a very small phrase of a dozen words: 'she was not at all astonished by the death of her husband.' Well, that little phrase weighed and will weigh forever upon the memories of the queen."

"Who was perhaps innocent," said Benoist.

"Perhaps, and even probably. The sight of Madame de Beaurand brought that idea to my mind, and I have not been able to get rid of it."

"This is not a very scientific method of procedure," said Theodore, rising.

"They have made some very singular discoveries in this way, thanks to like intuition," replied Bolvin, who remained seated. "Remember, Monsieur, the idea of a direct accusation is very far from me, but I can not avoid the idea that M. de Beaurand was killed on account of his wife."

"That is no reason for your thinking that she knew what was the cause," said Benoist, snappishly, not without a little anger.

"It is true; but then why was there that calmness which astonished you as much as it did me?"

The young man did not know what to answer.

"Adieu," said he, "I must go since I have nothing to tell you, and you have nothing to advise me upon the subject."

Bolvin arose.

"M. Benoist," said he, "I am very sorry to be unable to afford you any light upon this subject, which is so sadly obscure; pardon me for having been unable to make better success."

"You consider then that the researches are terminated?"

"They must be provisionally—and, moreover, I should deliver to you the papers which were found in the room of your unfortunate friend—the package is not large, will you take it and give it to the right person?"

"Very well," said Benoist, with a vague uneasiness.

Bolvin opened a drawer of the writing-desk and took from it a large envelope, which contained the

cards and the letters last sent to Raymond. Upon the top of a little file of papers was the envelope marked "Laval;" the deputy looked at it with profound attention, and said, in a tone full of regret:

"The secret is there," striking it lightly with his fingers; "but the envelope is mute. M. Benoist, would you accept some advice, some advice of the most disinterested sort? Guard well that envelope, speak of it to no one; perhaps, some day the missing letter will return and be placed there itself and then you will know all."

"Speak of it to no one, not even to Madame Montclar?"

"It were useless; it is very evident that the poor woman would be unable to aid you."

"Or to Madame de Beaurand?"

"I advise you to speak of it to no one," repeated the young magistrate with a fine smile which seemed skeptical.

"But what if she should be able to recognize the handwriting? If she"—

"It is little probable that she would be able to recognize a handwriting so like that of all people who are not in the habit of writing. Such styles of calligraphy disconcert even the efforts of experts. There will always be time to speak of it to her, if circumstances demand it."

"But"—

Bolvin placed his first finger, very lightly, upon the arm of Theodore.

"Mark you," said he, "that if Madame de Beaurand should know nothing, you will thus put this uneasiness in her head without profit."

"But," said Benoist, "she knows that they suspect her."

"Who told her of it?"

"I, in a moment of ill-humor. She was then very calm."

"You have done wrong. Mme. de Beaurand will distrust you."

"I believe that she will hate me, if she does not already," murmured the young man.

"One will not hinder the other, but on the contrary," remarked the deputy, with a smile which was almost a laugh. "We met in the world, Monsieur, and the present case interests me more because I had a great deal of sympathy for your friend, and that is why I had permitted myself to speak to you in a manner extra-professional; take care of the envelope. I am at your commands at any time when I can be of the least use to you, however little importance it may be. But if you learn anything, you will let me know it."

"Very well," said Benoist, taking leave of him.

When he was in the street, he breathed deeply two or three times, hoping that his restlessness would dissipate itself in the open air; but his desire was not fulfilled. As he walked slowly along the bank of the Seine he felt his forehead become wrinkled and his mind become concentrated. At last he stopped upon the quay and looked at the admirable display of stone, which he had under his eyes, as though he wished to find there some powerful element of distraction.

The beautiful morning sun of springtime gilded the poplars and the elms, which made a beautiful

wall of verdure upon the bank of the water under the pavilion of Flore; the sculpture of the Louvre took a brilliant relief in that bright light, and the foundation of gold, upon which arose so strongly the Génie upon the wing of the Antonin Mercié, shone like an auriole.

The row-boats, tugs, and flat-boats cut the green and pale water in all directions as it laughed and coursed through the arches of the bridges. The swallows cried out in their piercing calls and repeated by striking with their wings; the washer-women sang bareheaded in the washing-boats, and their laughter was heard from time to time when the tumult of the river was slightly hushed.

Behind the School of Fine Arts at the extremity of the Pont du Carrousel, flags floated upon the great flag-staffs to announce an exposition; the carriages, the omnibuses intercrossed each other with an almost methodical animation, with that sort of regulated fever that astonishes all strangers who see it for the first time. Hurried men, loiterers, working women, old savants with slow steps, employés loaded with packages, a whole world of passers-by, went and came without striking one another, stopping with an involuntary movement, some upon the bridge looking at the color of the water, some upon the quay, that they might rest their eyes upon the sumptuous mass of verdure that extended from the Royal Bridge to the Trocadéro, with the Arc de Triomphe as a crown, gilded like one of the portals of Paradise, by the triumphant morning sun.

Under the plane-trees, whose leaves had but just begun to peep from the buds, the book stalls attracted a busy public, similar, except for the noise,

to the bees over the bunches of thyme. Benoist looked at this dizzying sight enviously.

Those below him were happy, while they stole science and art from the books out of the reach of their purses, and which handled a hundred times finished by being read from one end to the other. They were not, like him, haunted by a troublesome idea, a bad idea, even the hateful idea born of one knows not what absurd germ. They had candid and good souls under the clear sun of May, at least, while they plundered with nose close to the half-opened book, and he—what had he done to deserve that malicious and painful idea which was incrusted in his mind?

Seeking for relief, where others seemed to find it, he took at hazard, from the first open case, the first volume that fell under his hand. It was an inept book; he returned it quickly to its place and chose another one. It was a judicial romance, whose title was "*Cherchez la Femme*" (Seek the Woman).

Impatient, he returned it and took a package of brochures. His eyes met upon the yellow cover, in words of large letters: "*Les Causes Célèbres*" (Celebrated Cases).

Decidedly, chance had a grudge against Benoist. He retook his road along the quay, looking at the trees of the Tuileries, trying to draw serenity from this corner of Paris, almost mute, almost motionless, where the bugle call from the barracks of the dragoons threw from time to time a musical note carried over the poetical ruins of the Cour des Comptes; all at once he asked himself where he was going and he perceived that his feet were carrying him toward the Rue de Lille.

What am I going to do there, he said to himself, angry at himself for once; and inflicting upon himself moral reproaches. He traversed with long strides the road of the Rue Drouot, where his bachelor quarters were situated.

CHAPTER IX.

After the first five days of mourning consecrated to the distressing but inevitable arrangement of affairs, Mme. Montclar had proposed to Estelle to take their departure for the Chateau de Beaurand; but the young woman, with all the discretion imaginable, expressed a firm desire not to go there.

"It is enough, dear aunt," said she, "that I have the sorrow of living alone with you in the hôtel in Paris; here, where we should both be, spare me the sorrow of recommencing this trial in a house with which I am not acquainted and where sorrowful emotions will no more be spared you than me."

This reasoning was too just for Mme. Montclar to refuse to accede to it.

From the estate of her mother, Estelle possessed at some distance from Chartres, a country house, important enough that there she could take great comfort, and yet modest enough so that it was not necessary to have there any considerable number of servants. It was there that the two women resolved to go during the beautiful season.

Mme. de Beaurand had hoped to escape from sorrowful remembrances by leaving the hôtel and not going to the Chateau de Beaurand. She had counted on the power of evocation which characterizes certain beings. The bloody vision of Raymond, with the terrible problem it entailed, followed her in her asylum, and moreover, the scenes of her childhood, which she had believed forgotten, returned to her mind with truly surprising distinctness.

Notwithstanding her great desire to not trouble in the least what peace might fall to the lot of Mme. Montclar after such a terrible trial, Estelle could not hinder herself from confiding in her, one evening as they were walking together in the garden near the great park upon the bank of the Loire.

It was an old garden, almost a century old, with tall hedges of yoke elm trees which formed a sort of labyrinth. Following the sinuous paths they turned slowly in a sort of helix, intersected by crossing paths which permitted them to go out easily; a little basin with a feeble jet of water and surrounded with banks occupied the center of this melancholy place, charming and fresh during the heat of midday. Since it was not yet eight o'clock, the sun had not quite set. At that period of the year when the days draw themselves out, little by little, the evenings have the penetrating charm of things which are about to be finished. One feels how small one's life has been, how precious are the hours of amber light, and with what rapidity the days decrease in number.

That impression, which never appertains to youth, was very strong with Mme. Montclar. Seated near the little basin, she looked at the gilded rays, which warmly colored the neighboring forest, decrease and retire to the summits.

"Behold what has occurred once more," said she, "with the warm sun of summer, which is the half of our terrestrial life. Who knows, if I shall be here to enjoy it next year."

"My good aunt," said Estelle, pressing her hand, "do not think of such sad things. You are not at that age when such things ought to preoccupy you."

"Who can say that he will even be alive to-morrow?" replied the old lady, sadly. "Raymond upon the threshold full of joy and of life"—

"My dear aunt, I beg of you"—

Mme. Montclar responded by pressing Estelle's hand and remaining for a moment silent to repress the tears which came to her eyes. She turned toward her neice and said:

"Tell me of yourself," said she. "I love you very much; but I know almost nothing of you. A young fiancée never gives anybody any confidences. Though I have appreciated your self-control, your tact and your goodness of soul, I can, however, assure you, my niece, that I may speak with truth, I know almost nothing of you. Speak to me of yourself. Did you live with your mother; and have you, in any way, preserved any remembrance of her?"

Estelle's brow became wrinkled and she spoke with some difficulty.

"I remember my mother very well," said she, "it was here that I passed with her the last summer of her life. I was then eight years of age, and at that age, one may receive impressions which are strong and durable."

Mme. Montclar listened for her to continue; but Estelle kept silent.

"And your father?"

"I have no remembrance of him. From the date which I have read on the civil acts, I could hardly have been two years old when he died. He traveled all the time. He was a man, it seems, of a restless disposition, who never remained long in the same place. It was at Florence that he died some eighteen years ago. My mother died six years after."

"Poor child," murmured Mme. Montclar, involuntarily, looking affectionately at the young woman, who followed with her eye the movements of the thin jets of water."

"Poor child, yes, truly," answered Estelle, in a low voice, and almost without inflection, as if the sight of the brilliant drops from the fountain had thrown her into a sort of magnetic repose. I did not think that I was unhappy; but now I comprehend that I was. This garden was my domain and here they never troubled me. From six o'clock in the morning until nightfall, I ran at liberty in it, recalled only at the noon hour by the clock, the same which sounds at present for us.

"Always alone," asked Mme. Montclar, "they did not occupy themselves with you?"

"So it was. In the morning at eight o'clock, I said good-morning to my mother in her room, she kissed my forehead and dismissed me. At noon, we took lunch, at seven o'clock, we dined together; she hardly ever spoke to me, except to ask me if I had been very good. I always was. I do not believe that a child was less cast down or petted or spoiled with things than I. I never merited it, besides I was at liberty to do just as I pleased from June till November."

"And the rest of the time?"

"I passed in the little school in a convent, not far from our home in Paris. Moreover, I liked the summer. The sight of the first green leaves drew to my eyes tears of joy and when the pathways were filled with dead leaves, I remained for hours motionless, watching them fall, my heart broken, my soul

in agony without perceiving that I was chilled by the north wind or wet through by the rain. All my happiness went with them, when those days came, I was scolded when I came into the house."

"By your mother?"

"No, my mother never scolded me, it was Rosalie, her *femme de chambre*, who had been my nursery maid and who occupied herself with me."

"She was very much attached to you?"

"Attached! No, I can not say that. She had for me a very peculiar sentiment. Certainly, she did not love me, notwithstanding she gave much of her care to my welfare. At bottom, I really think she detested me."

"Why?"

"I do not know; perhaps, while I was small, I had been very disagreeable. It is even very probable, according to what people have told me; they never spoke to me of my childhood."

Mme. Montclar was greatly moved with pity for this young woman who had had so few joys.

"And you never knew your father? Poor child. Mme. Brunaire died very young, did she not?"

"She was, I think, thirty years old; but she had been always sick since my birth and they told me that she was very much changed. However, such as my remembrance of her face is, she was still very beautiful."

"Do you resemble her?"

"Not in the least. She was slender, pretty and blonde with thin hands, very thin—my poor mother. When she was dead, Rosalie took me to see her. She seemed no more dead than while she lived."

"They might have spared you such an emotion. What good was it to thus impress you," said Mme. Montclar indignantly, "it was useless and cruel."

"Because Rosalie detested me. Then Mme. de Polrey took me to her home, her first care was to ask of Rosalie, if she would not enter in her service in order to attend me during the vacations. She became very angry. The Baroness was greatly astonished."

"That Rosalie seems to me to have been a very impertinent person," said Mme. Montclar.

"She was spoiled. Mamma let her do just exactly as she wanted to. You understand that, being so sick, so feeble, having always need of her services. At bottom, I think that she was almost afraid. Sometimes she would look at me with such a look in her eyes that I almost wanted to cry or else strike Rosalie with my fist."

"She was then a very wicked girl?"

"No, she was bizarre, she was rigidly honest, scrupulous in her conscience, to keep it clear from reproaches or anything and almost self-denying."

"How do you know that?"

"Mme. de Polrey told me so; for you think rightly that I was incapable of judging for myself. With a narrow and cruel piety for herself as well as for others. I slept regularly in my chair and she would arouse me a dozen times by shaking me. I would have liked so much more to have slept in my bed. To atone for this, in the most severe frosts of winter, she would have no fire in the room in which she slept near me; at five o'clock in the morning, if

I opened my eyes, I could see her, in the morning light in night dress and bare feet, upon the waxed floor, saying her prayers upon her knees."

"Then you never spoke of this to Raymond?" said Mme. Montclar, searching her memory.

"Yes," said she, with vivacity, shaking off the strange somnolence that weighed upon her; "I told Raymond about all the sad childhood I had, I even told him—listen, it is here, for I always loved this retreat. As at present, the sun had just disappeared and all had become dark very suddenly, I heard the call and footstep of Rosalie, who was hunting me to put me to bed, and I amused myself by avoiding her and thus gained a few minutes. Through the hedge, I heard her mutter some words. I approached behind it and I heard, 'Cursed be the day and cursed be the night, damned be the mother, the child and the father.' I was afraid and I ran up to her to stop her saying more. She took me rudely in her arms without saying anything and took me away. I was hardly able to sleep during that night."

"She must have been insane," said Mme. Montclar, rising. "What has become of her?"

"I believe she has returned to her own country, the lower part of Brittany, and that she became a member of a religious community."

On turning the corner of an alley in the dark labyrinth, they awakened a great night-bird which flew away with a plaintive cry. Both of them trembled, and Mme. Montclar took Estelle's arm.

"You have made me a coward with your story," said she. "That which is astonishing is that you never become cowardly."

"O, as for me," said the young woman, "I have been, and so much so, that, finding there was no use in it, I ceased to be so. One may become accustomed to living always with phantoms, and Rosalie should be a ghost, at least."

CHAPTER X.

Many people upon committing a reprehensible action, believe that they should give themselves to an almost irresistible desire to do something agreeable. Without desiring to pretend that this case never presents itself, one might well affirm that the larger part of dishonest actions, or those simply reprehensible, committed each day upon our globe, are accompanied by the strongest disgust, by the most distressing struggles in those who are the authors and who find themselves obliged to continue in a life in which they have engaged, without being able to deliver themselves from anything that they do.

At the moment when Bolvin had so strongly advised Theodore Benoist to take care of the envelope, the young man found it very natural to do so, in fact, of the friends of Raymond, he was the only one who was charged with the duty of discovering the probable causes of the suicide. The family was no longer in reality represented, except by the widow and Mme. Montclar; the male relatives of the family who still remained were either so distant or else so indifferent that they admitted the propriety of his doing this. Mme. Montclar was not in a state of mind capable of following or of taking up the search upon her own account; Mme. de Beaurand—

That was the feeble point in the argumentation: Mme. de Beaurand should have been the first not only to carry on the research but also to demand

that they who employed themselves with it, do their duty; but Benoist had no desire to confide this care to Mme. de Beaurand.

He had no desire to do so and it was that which enraged him; yet he really believed that the young woman desired him to continue the task which he had undertaken; he thought it—Why? For her? He had no need of being summoned to carry on the search with all the zeal desirable, and more than that he had a certain desire to know, which formed a part of his character. For her then?

Well, yes, for her. Was it not his duty to make known to all the world what hand, imprudent or criminal, had made her a widow upon the day of her marriage? And she said nothing, she did not even question. Mme. Montclar had written once or twice to find out with what success the search had been carried on; but Estelle had not given even a sign of life. It was a very delicate thing.

Delicate, it is true, for the search had not given the answer to a single question put to it, and since no one had any doubt with regard to the suicide of Raymond, it could be only officious; those only should enquire who had interest in knowing the moral cause of that act. Why did not Estelle herself inquire? Who more than she should desire to know the truth?

Such a course of reasoning and many others similar to it determined Raymond to take care of the envelope. But he had not had it in his possession twenty-four hours till he felt guilty for not having given it to the person to whom it legally belonged, and who should be put in possession of it, even Mme. Estelle de Beaurand herself.

He arose on the morning of the third day with the resolution to carry it to her immediately—that is, as soon as he could be admitted.

"And then I shall say nothing more of it," he said, with firmness. "The real truth is that I do not know why I ever bothered my head with regard to a thing which concerns me so little as that does. My friend commits suicide upon the day of his marriage; that is bad, very bad. Being his friend, I feel a deep sorrow. But why in the devil should I distress myself about it on account of Mme. de Beaurand, with whom I have hardly conversed, and who, to me, is not only extremely disagreeable, but hardly civil. What sentiments of dislike could I have for a woman who has none for me? Then why should I bother myself with doing injury to her? It must be that I have not control of myself. Let me end this, then, by taking my proper position."

That was to speak like Pallas-Athene in person; only the morning mail-carrier brought Benoist a letter from Mme. Montclar, which not only said that she regretted that he had not called upon them at the de Beaurand mansion; but also announced their departure for Saumeray, where they would pass the summer season, and it invited him to call upon them should he have any communication to make to them, or even if he should desire to do so.

The reading of this letter threw Benoist into a fit of anger. Like all those who do not decide in time, he accused Fate of being against him, and he apostrophized her in very warm language.

To upbraid Fate when one is in a passion, is of all

things, the most useless; it excites one's nerves, and, besides, it is no sooner said than it is forgotten by her. Benoist realized this at the end of an hour. He perceived that it was his fault. Why had he not gone to the Rue de Lille upon the same day that Bolvin gave him the package? Instead of taking the shortest way there, he mused upon the bridge like a loafer until he did not realize where he was. Only one thing remained for him to do; put the letters in an envelope under the direct orders that they be sent to Saumeray that very day.

Yes; but Mme. Montclar had never heard of the envelope, no more had Estelle. His most obvious duty was to advise them of the importance of the envelope, but how should he communicate it by letter? How should he explain the silence that he had kept upon that point?

Theodore Benoist perceived that it was very difficult for him to constitute himself the judge of instructions, and cursed the idea that he then held. The only thing that he could then do was to guard the envelope and papers until he should see Mme. Montclar and Estelle. After all, a delay would change nothing, and during that delay, who knows but that they might find a clue.

Soothed by this thought, Benoist ate his dinner, took a walk, and about four o'clock there came to him suddenly an imperious desire to refresh his soul, and he said to himself that he would see his mother.

Mme. Benoist was a very original person. The daughter of a rich vintner of Anjou, she married a vintner without fortune, whose family had been ruined by the *oidium*, before the time when a cruel

fate had created the *phylloxera* in all its perfection. She had the pleasure of taking her fortune with her to the worthy ruined fellow whom she knew to be a capable and intelligent man. And, moreover, she loved him, and that surmounted the best of logic.

Alone in all that region they had the courage to sacrifice their doubtful harvest in order to apply an energetic treatment, and they succeeded.

"My lady, one must have other money in order to wait!" said the people to her.

The result was surprising, and within a few years the fortune of the Benoists had been tripled. An only son was born to them, and said the father, "He shall be a soldier."

He passed his examinations with honor and was sent to Saint-Cyr at the same time with Raymond, to whom he was very strongly attached. The son of the general and the son of the vintner resembled each other in many points and differed in many others, in such a way that their friendship augmented the differences of their characters.

Benoist's father being dead, the widow took charge of the investments, and they did not go badly. Theodore, after many years of service resigned from the army, where he became noted as an officer of good qualities, though not extraordinarily called to the profession, and he began to study scientifically the growth of grapes in a manner to contend with the new enemy which had recently been discovered. It was thus that he passed his winters in Paris, returning to Vouvray only when his mother had need of him.

Upon that day when he had no more plausible

motive he had the desire to see a good face, to behold the look of two frank eyes; very strange things for a young man of thirty-two years, so ruggedly schooled. He had an extraordinary desire to be embraced and fondled as in the times when he was a small child—when he had received a blow from the fist of some comrade, or had been struck with a stone by another. Upon such occasions as that, one enters the house well washed and wiped, and one is careful of speaking of one's fights before the parents; but the mother could see come into her fissue or her apron, before the age when he had become a young man, a little, good-for-nothing head, which rubbed itself and rested there.

"You are, then, hurt pretty badly, my son," says the mother, who is not a mother for nothing.

"No, mamma; but kiss me, all the same."

Benoist perceived that in arranging properly he might arrive at Vouvray that evening. His valise was quickly packed, and in a short time after he was rolling toward Orleans.

When he descended from the car the night was as black as ink. A few stars, lost in the obscure velvet immensity, showed him the road which he could have followed, even with his eyes closed, and he arrived at the great gate-way without having struck his foot upon a single stone at the side of the road.

He drew out his key, which he carried in prevision of these late journeys, and opened the little door and entered the court. The large watch-dog recognized him, for he was barking before the kennel with a satisfied air and his tail beat against the wood with an unusual vehemence.

"Yes, Monsieur Pollux; it is I; it's your master." The shaggy head advanced to receive a caress, and the good watch-dog re-entered his kennel with a formidable bark of warning. A light burned behind the thin curtains, and above the kennel a window was open. A woman's head, dressed like a monk's, with a very white bonnet posed upon the hair, seemed to detach itself from the light back-ground of the room.

"Is it you, Theodore?" said she, in the most tranquil manner possible, as if he had just gone out for the evening.

"Yes, mother, do not come down, I will come up. There is no need of a light."

"Very well," said Mme. Benoist, closing the window.

A moment later they were at the top of the stairs in a large hall and a large *cage d'escalier* whose bannisters and heavy billots of turned oak had seen generations of vintagers.

"Good evening," said Benoist, embracing his mother.

"Good evening, my son," answered she, kissing him. She had seized him by the lapelle of his great coat in order to kiss him, for she was very small and he did not bow his head very much.

"What has taken you so suddenly that has made you come?" said she to him with tenderness, when he was seated in Mme. Benoist's room upon a straw chair near a round black walnut table before two candles which she had lighted in their old silver candlesticks placed upon the chimney. "You are not sick?"

"No, mamma," answered Theodore, very much embarrassed about explaining the cause of his return.

His mother looked at him with clear eyes, full of perspicacity and maternal tenderness.

"You are not sick, are affairs going well? It must be that something has gone wrong, my dear son?"

No, mamma," responded the son, pressing to his breast the form of the old lady, "but kiss me all the same."

CHAPTER XI.

The vineyard lay under the hot sun upon the hillside. The crooked vine stocks extended their little massive and short arms, and from place to place a soft, white bud thrust itself through the gray covering; below the hillside, the houses and the gardens, the ranges of poplars made along the Loire, a hedge of honor like soldiers at present arms. The noble river ran rapidly as though it had to fill below, toward the west, some duty unavoidable and pressing; the west wind ruffled it's surface in brilliant waves, and from time to time, a great sail, higher than the houses, describing the arc of a circle, ascended the river. The black hulls of the boats cut the waves with a rushing noise, while the helmsman, immobile, leaned against the tiller, casting a look at the nearing of the bend of the river. The waters were high for that season of the year, the trees in a tender young green of a still light foliage, were mirrored upon the now gilded river, like exquisite transparent lace. Theodore who was looking over the vines with his mother, could not avoid stopping to admire the landscape which he had seen a thousand times, at all hours of the day, never being satiated. "It is beautiful," said he, while his mother leaned upon a grapestock examining it with the care that a doctor would the pulse of his patient. The old lady rose, shading with her hand, eyes that had never known the need of glasses, and surveyed with a look, the river and it's banks, and answered:

"Yes, it is beautiful; it is a beautiful country."

After this, she continued her inspection.

Her vineyard was not like other vineyards, it was her child and a child saved at the price of a terrible struggle. Mme. Benoist felt herself to be the mother of her vineyard as much as one might feel proud of being the mother of a superb and delicate son, menaced by a hereditary disease, and above all this at the mercy of ordinary accidents. She spoke little and always reservedly, as one will do kindnesses of which one is not exactly sure. Some years before, Theodore in order to please her had said that he was becoming jealous of the vineyard. The old lady answered him:

"Well, it has given me a great deal more trouble than you ever did." A large veil of very fine linen hung from the bonnet, placed well forward upon her head, hiding the fine and regular features, the black eyes lively and brilliant, a skin almost imperceptibly wrinkled by the action of the sun and rain. Never had Mme. Benoist worn any other than this *bonnet de paysanne*, except when upon Sundays she went to mass or when she appeared dressed in black silk and a bonnet of black lace. She was a paysanne who wished to remain a paysanne, at the same time, when she wished, she had the means and the heart of being a very grand woman.

Her son looked at her, agitated by a singular indecision, not knowing whether he ought to depart on that day, now that he had seen her, or if it would be better to remain at Pressoirs until his ideas had taken their proper course. This discontentment which tried him rendered life difficult and full of

many slight vexations. Would not the country air drive away all these phantoms?

Mme. Benoist rose with that prolonged strengthening peculiar to those who stoop often.

"If heaven wills, the sun and the rain also," said she, "the year will not be a bad one. There are already some blades."

Her search satisfied, she looked over the magnificent hillside, over the red earth where there did not appear a plant, and over the beautiful country, the sweet country of Touraine, then returned upon her son, but prudently, looked carefully around him, before definitively placing her eyes upon him. "And you, my son," said she, with a half smile, "does the year promise to be equally good?"

"Mamma," said Benoist, deciding quickly, "I am troubled; I am very sad; I have lost one of my friends in a villainous way, by a terrible death, and that has brought care to me. I have need of seeing you in order to come into my right mind."

"Then the Pressoirs are dearer to my son than Paris. You have done well to come," said the old lady, looking across the vines. "But why do you say that your friend, died a terrible death? Did some one deal him a mortal wound?"

"No, not that, mother. He killed himself."

"Then it was your friend Raymond de Beaurand?" said the old lady, with a secret pride.

She wished to remain one of the common people; but the aristocratic friendships of her son gave her a secret pleasure, and made the country people think the Benoists were the equals of the nobility.

"You know of it?" said Theodore, surprised.

"Yes, I read the paper," answered Madame Benoist, tranquilly, and not without a slight tinge of irony. "Since you have been thrown into high society I read *Figaro*. Should I not know something of the people who see my son?"

Benoist looked affectionately at his mother. They had entered a little grassy path, which led toward the house, across the garden, a real flower garden, like that of a curé, with rustic flowers, some plates-bandes seemed to resemble squares of legumes; a charming and odorous garden, planted to lavender and to rosemary, like those so much depicted in the old French songs.

"Then," answered Theodore, "you are aware of the terrible death of my poor friend?"

"Yes, my son, I understand something of your sorrow; but"—

The mother said no more; her clear eyes spoke for her and said intelligibly:

"But your face bears traces of a greater tormenting than that which would come from the death of your friend, terrible as it was."

"You see, mother, that some things have occurred, some very sad things, that make one think."

Mme. Benoist made a quick movement, as though to stop him, and began to walk with an alert step.

"Why did he kill himself? What foolishness of youth, that appeared at such an unseemly time, had he committed?"

"Oh, will you believe it? Beaurand was the very personification of honor."

"A story about his wife then—"

"I do not know," said Benoist, with a thoughtful

air. "A story about his wife—yes—it was probably that."

"You do not know?"

"I know nothing."

"But you suspect?"

The young man was undecided; all at once he determined.

"I am going to tell you all, mother," said he, "you have such a clear mind, and such good judgment, that I think I shall be unable to find a better counselor."

In a few words he recounted the story of the tragedy, the course that he had followed, his last visit to the deputy, and the possession of the letters of the deceased.

"You have kept these papers and the envelope? Why have you not given them to the widow?"

Benoist looked at his mother with a perplexed air, without answering.

"It is the widow only who should have those papers, my son. You must send them to her at once."

Obviously embarrassed, the young man explained that under the peculiar circumstances, he had never spoken to her about the envelope.

"But, my dear son, should she not, before all others, know of these things? Is there anything more sacred than a widow? Theodore, I am greatly astonished that you did not think of that."

"Mother, she is not a widow as you are," said Benoist with vivacity.

"Do you wish to say that she is unworthy?"

"No, oh no! but she did not love Beaurand as you loved my father."

"That makes no difference, my son. No one knows what passes through the heart of a woman when she sees lying before her the body of the man whom she has sworn to follow, respect and love, even to the tomb. One must be a woman to understand such things."

He bowed his head, affected, if not convinced.

"Do you know what that woman thought? Do you know what she suffered? Do you not see that if she loved her husband ever so little, she must have been most cruelly affected; and if she did not love him, how she must have reproached herself?"

"With what?"

"With not having loved him enough to have saved him by her love from a wrong that came from others," said the mother with an almost solemn gravity. "Believe me, that woman has well mourned the loss."

Theodore did not answer. His mother looked at him without being observed. They had arrived in front of the house, pretty and venerable, antique without decay, grand without ostentation; the home of a family which had always been honorable.

"You do not believe me then," said Mme. Benoist. "Then you dislike that woman very much?"

"No," said he with an effort; "but I cannot help thinking that she is in someway related to this sad affair, and even mixed up in the cause of it."

The old lady straightened up and put her hand upon the shoulder of her son; he was tall and she was small; the browned hand was still small in spite of the work of years, and seemed to be very

small upon the somber background, but it had, however, an extraordinary weight.

"Never accuse a creature of God unless you know exactly of what you are accusing it. Never think ill of a woman unless you are sure she merits it. And if that woman has neither father nor mother, neither brothers nor a husband to defend her, be then still more prudent, my son, for injustice would be a crime. And one can not imagine what the unfortunate one would suffer on account of it."

Theodore took the hand which held him under its command and kissed it with respect. They entered in the great paved room, where the coffee and milk steamed in the polished brown earthen vessels, as in the good old times. They were alone. Mme. Benoist waited upon her son, passing him the plateful of small buttered biscuit, which he liked so much, and which were made expressly for him whenever he came.

"Is the lady pretty?" she asked.

"Very beautiful."

"Lovable?"

"They say so."

"Is she cold toward you?"

"I believe she detests me."

Mme. Benoist remained silent for a moment, looking at her son. All at once their eyes met; those of Theodore showed an anguish so sad, so hopeless, that his mother felt herself deeply affected. Rising from her chair, she went to Benoist and put her arms around his neck.

"Ah, my poor son," said she in a low and broken tone, "you love that woman?"

"Yes," said he in the same tone, "but still I can not help thinking that she is culpable."

He hid his head in the maternal bosom; the arms that had drawn him to her pressed him closer, and in the little folds of the fichu which covered the noble heart, he pressed out two large tears that had risen to his eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

Toward the end of August Mme. Montclar became weary of solitude; for, to a woman who has always been in society, an exile of four months in the country *tête-á-tête* with a widow, is a hard enough trial.

In that long reclusion she had opportunity to learn the grand moral qualities of Estelle; but she also learned that the young woman did not have the same ideas of life as had those among whom she lived.

More than once Mme. Montclar had been surprised to hear her say, in the easiest manner possible, that she had a certain disdain, or, at least, a distaste for the pleasures and the duties of which it seemed inadmissible to not appreciate the value.

"Just like Raymond," she would say to herself, "she has been perfectly schooled, and could conduct herself with the utmost propriety; but one can see that she has not been convinced of the necessity of forms that she observes, and that she very much prefers something else. My poor nephew would have been a wonder living with her, and they would have lived like a couple of wolves during the greater part of the year. But in a man it is excusable. My brother, General de Beaurand, was the same."

Having given vent to these impressions, in this little monologue, Mme. Montclar felt that she ought to go with her niece to some quiet retreat, to the seashore, for example, where there would be no social duties or regular balls, and the thing was to find such a retreat.

By the aid of the *Guide Joanne*, and her own memory, Mme. Montclar finally decided upon a solemn, quiet place, a refuge for the judiciary, to whom its position afforded the opportunity of avoiding the more fashionable places. The people of the country were very deferential to their austere lords with long grey beards, and to ladies of pronounced age, with hair dressed in bonnets of lace. At such places one was assured of receiving the attention due one among a population not yet contaminated by the corruptions of the cities, and imbued with respect for venerable things.

That is to say, Mme. Montclar had chosen Saint Aubin.

The arrival of two such eminently distinguished women, dressed in mourning and accompanied by their waiting maids, was an event the more noticeable because these ladies ate in their own rooms, and that no one had any occasion whatever to speak to them.

Their names were placed upon the register of the hotel and soon became subjects of comments; but the bathers at St. Aubin were so candid that the names raised no remembrance in their minds. The public attention, accompanied by a marked consideration, attached to these persons who had such a grand air, and they waited the arrival of some bather better informed, who could tell them of that which they desired to know.

Mme. Montclar, however, returned to social life; that is to say, she became visible. For a woman that has always lived surrounded by friends, isolation is premature death. The sight of human faces, though

void of beauty, was to her, like fresh water to a plant long exposed to the heat of the sun. And then, beside the curious bathers, she thought that the month of September could not help bringing her some other diversion, having written to three or four of her friends to come and be with her at St. Aubin, she thought, at least, that one or two would surely arrive during the month.

Upon the contrary, Estelle greatly enjoyed this absence from society. The shock which she had received, left upon her durable traces; to the stupor of the first moment and to the indignation of the second, a sort of consternation had succeeded. Was it possible that the world was always so light and cruel? She wished to believe that that affair would be quickly forgotten and that no one would pay more attention to her. Benoist only, she very truly believed, continued to regard her in that unquiet and cold way, which had so singularly wounded her. She reproached herself, for being troubled by that idea and could not hinder herself from always thinking of it.

It was with consternation that she knew herself to be actually accused by the grave man; and accused of what? She absolutely did not know. Her thought could not go to the bottom of the odious suspicion. She supposed that some one had told him some love story which he had carried to Raymond and that had occasioned a movement of jealousy so violent as to make him insane. It was the only explanation that she could find, and that explanation in the eyes of a stranger, did not lack a certain plausibility and to her it seemed even trustworthy.

But to her, to whom the character and the heart of her fiancé, her husband of a few hours, had been disclosed without reserve in their conversations, she knew well that it was false, and that Raymond had no suspicion of her; she knew that, calumnized, she could not be dear to him. It was precisely that unbounded adoration, which had touched her: it was the confidence, the esteem and the recognition provoked by that complete abandonment to her whole being, which had given to this young woman the hope of loving later, in her turn, him who loved her then so unselfishly.

No, Estelle had no part in the suicide of her husband, she was certain of it, before her conscience, which she had a thousand times interrogated. Had she not also told him of all her life, of her sad childhood? In the same way that he had opened up the soul of the man and the soldier to her. Had she not also told him the story of her life, as a young girl, so devoid of interest and romance, clear and pure as crystal.

Being struck by the force of the impossibility, she had finished by believing that Raymond had been the victim of sudden insanity, caused not by jealousy, but by the extreme tension of his mind during those last days; if not this, then what? This explanation did not satisfy her, but allowed her pity to still continue with a profound tenderness born of the catastrophy and mixed with tears. It was because of that, that she disclosed her heart to no one, fearing all illusion, hating every word upon the subject of her dead husband, whose loss was so sincerely mourned.

Surely Estelle loved him better dead than she had loved him living; disengaged from the terrestrial element of which she had always a sort of instinctive distaste, her affection rested upon the tomb of Raymond like a bird that could use its wings no more.

It was upon these high and consoling thoughts that the young widow had found a sort of justification of Theodore Benoist in her eyes. A generous friendship, as good as ordinary affections, such as Raymond alone could inspire with his chivalrous qualities, could have instigated the young man to defend his dead friend, to avenge him, if possible; standing guard to a great sorrow and having a secret detestation for those who might misknow her upon that point, Estelle was not far from admiring him.

With a certain impatience, mixed perhaps with a little fever, she awaited the moment when the routine of worldly relations would bring Benoist to the house of Mme. Montclar where she might impress upon him with all her force, the truth of her innocence; it was impossible that a man capable of being the dearest friend of Raymond could remain insensible to clear light and true purity. With such a dislike as she held for such a life, it became an almost intolerable burden.

Estelle was twenty years of age and did not doubt the absolute justness of things; that faith placed in her future a vague, almost insensible light, but the reflection of which softly colored her thoughts.

The first series of bathers of August packed their trunks; the corridors of the hotels were filled with numberless little packages—straw baskets, shrimp-nets, folding chairs, wicker baskets—all bearing in

letters, more or less readable, the word Saint-Aubin embroidered, painted or engraved in the way to make them the least odious; objects destined to make the impatient mammas fret until the opening of school, ruing the day when their lack of foresight had permitted these intolerable souvenirs to enter into their existences.

The second series, that of September, made its appearance and ranged its linen in the drawers left empty by the first; the newcomers installed themselves at the hotel tables, interrogating with looks the rows of attentive heads, saluting with an air, roguish or content, the visages found well or ill apropos.

The magistrature assize was very well represented that year. In their ranks were noticeable some "debout" come to take care of their advancement, at the same time to attend to their healths. Among those who came was André Bolvin. He was an honest fellow, very much noted, full of talent and finesse, but like all those who follow one idea, trusting wholly in it, his successes had been a little disappointing, and for some time he had held that disagreeable idea of having no faith in innocence; but upon pushing it, one might make him admit that one ought to arrange it so as to have always under the hand, a second suspect, in case the first should escape.

Upon Sunday afternoon, all the new visitors and the old ones that remained went upon the seashore, and there were recognitions and introductions without number. Mme. Montclar and her niece, seated upon the grassy plat, back from the beach, observed these proceedings with more or less interest.

Bolvin walked along, saluting here, saluted there, according to the importance of the people. A well-dressed lady, accompanied by two daughters, smiled at him; he went to her, and was immediately engrossed.

"Monsieur Bolvin, you who know all, tell me those whom I do not know."

He named over with much complaisance and a little cynicism the bathers whom he knew. Mme. Barrière was charming, and really made an ideal belle-mère.

"And these and those?"

This singular fellow knew everybody. At last he rested his eyes upon the sward where were Mme. Montclar and Estelle.

"And those ladies," said the younger of the Misses Barrière.

"They are too far away," said the young deputy, trying to distinguish them without being indiscreet.

"I can tell you their names," said the elder. "They are Mme. de Beaurand and her aunt, Mme. Montclar, the one old and the other young, both are very beautiful and in deep mourning. Mme. Montclar is the younger is she not?"

Bolvin made an easy movement, very slow, and ceased to look to that side.

"If you are sure of their names, Mademoiselle, the elder is Mme. Montclar."

"Truly? Why are they in deep mourning? They are of the highest society, are they not?"

"Of the best society," said Bolvin coldly. "Mme. Montclar is the aunt of Mme. de Beaurand, she was the aunt of her husband."

"Mme. de Beaurand is a widow? So young! Beaurand! I know that name. There is a history. Wait!"

"Mme. de. Beaurand has been a widow since the day of her marriage," said Bolvin, with an almost unobservable motion of disdain.

"Oh, yes, I know, a suicide. Oh, it was strange."

"An accident, my dear lady." said Bolvin with an almost imperceptible smile.

He immediately repented for having added that word and that smile; but it was too late.

CHAPTER XIII.

That same evening all Saint-Aubin was talking of Mme. de Beaurand. The occurrence had already become so old that it was not fresh in all their minds; but it was not yet old enough to have been completely forgotten, and each one wished to appear to be equally well informed with her neighbor, and remembered something that the paper had said about the accident.

Mme. Montclar and her niece, while they were being discussed in the groups, tranquilly walked upon the beach, admiring the setting sun. Their shadows were cast distinctly upon the sand in front of the speakers, and when they approached them a halo of fire seemed to surround their heads.

The attention fixed upon them was not kindly already their grand air and their reserved manner had provoked a certain enmity among the good women who wished only to make acquaintances at the resorts and who never went bathing, going to the resorts for that only.

Little by little a slight shunning of the persons, who took their dinners in their own rooms in the hotel, arose, and certain boarders at the hotel pretended that the wings of their own fowls were not long enough to carry them so high, and that was, indeed, sufficient to arouse envious feelings, without adding that of the feeling that there were people there who payed higher prices for services than did they.

When the two women, in order to enter their

rooms, passed in front of the troops of bathers, united or scattered in groups, all eyes, as by the same movement were directed towards them, and silence rested upon all.

Surprised, Estelle raised her eyes and encountered a score of glances, of curiosity among the women, and of cynicism among the men.

A peculiar feeling made her draw the folds of her cloak about her, as if to defend herself; but she passed haughtily, with a cold demeanor, with the disdain of a queen who ignores even the existence of her infamous subjects. Mme. Montclar, who happily, had her head bowed, saw nothing of this.

When they reached the hotel the old lady turned again to see the setting of the sun; Estelle did likewise, and in the sweeping glance that she cast over the beach her eyes beheld André Bolvin.

"Ah," she said to herself, "I understand. But what right has that man to speak of me?"

A dull anger made her heart beat a little more quickly. Upon entering the salon she saw through the window such a wonderful arrangement of the clouds that she could not resist the temptation to contemplate it again; her aunt followed her and they went to the balcony.

They were talking very actively upon the beach; and some of the conversers were but a short distance from the hotel, the air was very clear, and the sound of their voices rose very distinctly; Estelle heard some words the sound of which vibrated in sonorous syllables and very clearly, and she understood that they were speaking of her and her husband.

"Poor fellow," said one man, laughing, "perhaps he had to do better."

Mme. de Beaurand felt a profound disgust take possession of her.

On account of Raymond dead and herself living and injured she had a feeling of revolt that destroys the peace of mind and pushes one almost to hatred. At twenty, one has not yet had time to learn tolerance; the young woman condemned to herself, without recourse, all the women, all the men, who, not thinking for a moment that she might be still weeping for Raymond in his tomb, amused themselves with the scandal.

It was André Bolvin who had started this fire, it was through him that they had learned of Estelle; he had never seemed sympathetic since their short interview; she seemed to be seized with an uncontrollable aversion for him while a great dejection enveloped her like a shroud of lead.

"The beach is animated, Estelle," said Mme. Montclar, with an astonishing apropos. "We who do not mix in these little intrigues amuse ourselves by looking at them. It is singular. You were never before at a watering-place?"

"Never, aunt," answered Estelle, her eyes all the time fixed upon the groups with their heads together, forgetting all political disagreement in the universal activity of slander, there upon the sward.

"This resembles a watering-place nearly enough," said the old lady, in a placid tone; "there is always a coterie or two; from our balcony we can see them all—it is very pleasing. Besides, I hope that my friend, Mme. Daubray, will come next week; she will draw us into the current, for she has a wonderful tact."

Estelle, upon the contrary, had a very strong desire to go away, to return to Saumeray, in order that she might avoid the looks of those then around her; but how could she speak of it without, at the same time, speaking of André Bolvin? She held such an extreme repugnance to introducing into her conversations the remembrance of the death of her husband, that she preferred to keep silence.

The curiosity which the two women inspired ended at the close of two or three days, without entirely disappearing. The arrival of some and the departure of others always gave new points to the commentaries. The season, unhappily for Estelle, was admirable, and September, still more balmy, more beautiful than July, had prolonged the bathing season beyond the ordinary limits. At last the friend of Mme. Montclar arrived.

She was a large woman, thin and withered, very friendly, very affable, one of those persons whom one meets inevitably in all houses where they receive many, one of those who aid in doing the honors, present people to others, introduce the dancers to the homely girl and mix themselves generally in marriage affairs—without a shade of judgment, without an atom of malice. Too impersonal to not be good in the world, and too impressionable to have any opinions of their own, they change their minds according to the society with an ingenuity which at least makes them almost interesting.

Even though she bore the title, Mme. Daubray was not a friend to Mme. Montclar, because the exclusive cares for her family prevented her giving much of her friendship outside, but the word "friend-

ship" designating in the most correct manner the relation slightly *banal*, which the women of the world voluntarily entertain; they went together to the theater, to the springs, to the sea-side resorts—they were always together in society, they saw each other every day, they spoke of the same people and of the same happenings. What difference did it make if at heart they cared very little for each other? A widow and unembarrassed, with sufficient income to be independent, Mme. Daubray was always ready to come or go, provided that she were not occupied elsewhere. Coming from a tiresome sojourn at the house of the sick relation, she was very much pleased to see Mme. Montclar, whom she had not consoled in her misfortune, having been at the time detained at Cannes, and she showed a lively pleasure in making the acquaintance of Mme. de Beaurand, so interesting and so beautiful. She was ignorant of what was said, not having put her foot in Paris for six months, except to change her winter clothing for summer wear.

After a long conversation with Mme. Montclar, the new-comer went toward the beach to hear what was being said, and she was not away long; in less than twenty minutes she had met five or six persons of her acquaintance. From the balcony, which she had hardly quitted, Estelle could see her seated in the midst of a group of which Mme. Barrière was one; the young daughters, some distance away were bathing. The conversation made good progress; they got their heads together; two or three times Estelle saw them cast curious looks toward the hotel; surely they spoke of her.

A horrible sensation, that of knowing oneself to be torn in pieces by the beautiful teeth of a neighbor, of whom one can demand no explanation nor ask for its cause; to be sure that one questions your reputation, your honor, and to be unable to lay it to a single person, the evasive calumny having an anonymous author and for authority that complacent word, "they," the accomplice of all perfidiousness, of all slanders and of all outrages. Estelle knew that bitterness and believed herself crushed with the first blow. She deceived herself. At the dinner hour, Mme. Daubray, who would go to dinner with her friend, returned, always smiling, but not without a certain reserved look for Mme. de Beaurand.

With her sensative impressionability, she immediately perceived the coolness and herself retired in a cold pride which produced upon the new-comer a very bad effect. This armed peace lasted two or three days without Mme. Montclar knowing it—so happy was she in having a companion according to her tastes.

However, she could not help perceiving, one fine evening, that the relation between her neice and her friend were too cool to be cordial.

"Does Mme. Daubray displease you?" asked she of Estelle, who silently retired to the balcony taking refuge in contemplating the horizon.

"I have no opinion, whatever, of her," answered the young woman, upon re-entering the salon. "I have seen her very little. It is I, I believe, who have not had the happiness to please her."

"Well, haven't you had time enough in which to

become acquainted with her?" asked Mme. Montclar, much surprised.

Understanding that the moment had come in which to speak, notwithstanding all the interest, all the pity which the old lady inspired in her, Estelle looked at her softly and put her beautiful white hand forward to caress the hand put toward her.

"My dear aunt," said she, "you have, until now, extended to me your protection; behold this is the moment when you shall find it difficult. I have been calumned, you know that; far from being stopped, that calumny has gained headway and your friend has heard the echo of it, that is all."

"Is it possible, Estelle?" cried Mme. Montclar, terrified.

"Ask your friend."

"You wish that I should ask?"

"I wish that you should know, my dear aunt, that which I have endured for a week and that to which you have exposed yourself in being the chaperon of a widow such as am I. I beg of you, ask of her."

After a short moment of hesitation, the old lady knocked at the door of Mme. Daubray, which was situated upon the same floor.

"Tell me frankly, my dear," said she, "have you heard anything whatever, disagreeable, with regard to my niece?"

Her friend was neither mean nor a deceiver, she understood that the situation was serious and responded affirmatively.

"Who has had ——"

"Everybody," said Mme. Daubray, innocently.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was not without great difficulty that Mme. Montclar obtained the desired information from her friend. The worldly experience of Mme. Daubray, as thorough as it could be, had taught her nothing of how to act under such circumstances, and every one of her words were literally torn from her when it was necessary to relate the details. After much work, the résumé of the information was this: Estelle was accused of having assassinated her husband upon the day of their marriage. The domestics had seen her come from the chamber of crime, with blood upon her gown.

At this revelation, Mme. Montclar let a sickly laugh escape which it was difficult to control: However, as she was a discreet person, she knew how to control her feelings and cut short the nervous crisis which menaced her and recovered her *sang froid* in an instant.

"This is the idle story that they have told you," said she to Mme. Daubray, and you ought to place no confidence in it. You, at least, ought to have been able to ask me about the facts of which I know more than any other person since I did not leave my niece from the moment when we returned from the church until we both, together, entered the room of my unfortunate nephew."

On that remembrance she was seized by a new emotion which she could not control and which gave to her friend time in which to answer.

"But, my dear," said the poor soul in distress, "I never believed this horrible story. Only put yourself in my place. It is extremely embarrassing in such direct communication with a person of whom everybody ——"

Mme. Montclar, slightly weakened, cut short the words.

"My neice is very much distressed by being accused by these fools," said she in a firm voice, without judgment enough to know that they add to her sorrow. I assure you that there is not a word of truth in the story. If only my poor nephew—in a sudden stroke of delirium, without doubt, for it seems to me impossible to understand it otherwise—my poor Raymond shot himself. Without malice and without inhumanity this sad affair should have passed as an accident; but then, when one begins to believe what a domestic says ——; at least, my dear, I hope that you will take advantage of the confidence which I have just placed in you to defend my poor Estelle, who has truly too much unhappiness."

"Be sure, my dear friend," said Mme. Daubray, very much discomfitted, "if I had been able to foresee ——"

"What would you have done?" asked Mme. Montclar, a little brusquely.

"I would not have come to Saint-Aubin," retorted the unfortunate one, who was seated alone, in tears, profoundly pitying herself for her fate. "To come to Saint-Aubin in order to breathe the sea air with one's friends, and then to find one's self mixed in an abominable tale! It's enough to make one sick."

Mme. Montclar returned to Estelle in a very

troubled state of mind. The reality of the case did not permit discussion. In the eyes of the old lady it was odious even to the point of grotesqueness, and the absurd side made her think that it could not sustain examination. A second reflection recalled, however, the thought that, in general, people hardly examine the probability of calumnies; they admit them without discussion; and it is that which gives them so much weight.

Mme. de Beaurand awaited her aunt without fear, but with a certain agitation. Was she going to know at last of what she was accused? Her face had such a direct questioning look that Mme. Montclar answered immediately.

"My child," said she, "they say, very plainly, that you killed your husband."

Estelle's face showed neither the indignation nor the horror that her aunt believed it would provoke, but a disdain which touched the heart of the old lady. She took her niece by the hands and drew her toward her with a gesture full of nobleness.

"Aunt," answered the young widow, "does that astonish you? I was not in the least surprised. Is it not necessary to foresee all when they insult one?"

"You're a brave girl," replied Mme. Montclar, kissing the pure forehead, which rose to a level with her own, "but do you know what they have also invented? You cannot guess. They pretend that your robe was covered with spots of blood."

Estelle was seriously struck and looked at her aunt, allowing her hands to fall.

"They say that?" said she, in a strangely altered voice. "They are right."

Mme. Montclar thought for an instant that her niece had lost her mind.

"They are right," repeated the widow. "My traveling gown, that which I wore that day, fell into the blood when I leaned over him. Ah," cried she, hiding her face in her two cold hands, "is it not enough to have seen it? Is it necessary that these wretches evoke by derision the remembrance of that horrible moment? No, no; it is too much."

She had recoiled as if the body of Raymond was once more before her.

"My niece," said Mme. Montclar, whose throat was choked with emotion, hardly allowing the words to escape, "are you sure of what you have said?"

"Yes, when we went in, do you remember, I ran to him, and I wished to raise him—could I have thought of anything else at that time? He was my husband, I had sworn to love him and to obey him. Ah! why was I not taken with him! I should have suffered less."

She recoiled once more, and fell upon the couch in the position of veritable physical and mental torture. Upon the contrary, Madame Montclar seemed to have received all the strength which Estelle, so long oppressed, allowed to flow into her.

"Estelle, hear me, that robe"—

"Of gray silk which you made me wear upon leaving, because Raymond liked the color so much. Yes, it was soaked with blood. The whole hem. I did not perceive it; it was my *femme de chambre* Betzy who showed it to me some hours after."

"What did you do with it?" asked Mme. Montclar.

"I had all that burned that was stained, and the

rest—I do not know any more. I think I gave it to Betzy. Oh! Raymond! Raymond."

She wrung her hands. With a tenderness mixed with authority, her aunt seated hereself near her and she immediately became motionless.

"Estelle be calm. That was an unhappy occurrence; but it should not trouble such a mind as yours. No more should it trouble me who did not leave you during the whole of that horrible day. What difference does it make if you are accused since I, in the name of the dead, assume the duty of defending you, and it is I who should do so?"

The thought of Theodore Benoist ran through the head of Estelle like an arrow, with a recrudescence of sorrow she tore her trembling hands from those of the old lady.

"Aunt," said she, a prey to a terrible anguish, "you might affirm that I did not kill Raymond, and, perhaps some one would believe you. But you can never prove that he was not killed on account of me, on account of my dishonor, perhaps. Nobody will be able to prove that, and there are those who will believe it. But in truth I swear to you that I would rather have them believe that I was capable of that than that I married him with a stained character."

Estelle's voice was so poignant, and such a sad sincerity arose from all her bruised self, that Mme. Montclar could no longer contain herself. And as much as she disliked extreme and passionate demonstrations, she threw her arms about Estelle.

"My daughter, I have said to you that we should search together, I have but ill kept my promise,

I have been feeble and indolent. God has punished me for thus torturing you. But I shall repair my fault, and if there is one person in the world who will come to our aid it is Theodore Benoist."

Estelle disengaged herself from the arms that held her.

"If you have counted upon him you have leaned upon a frail reed, my dear friend," said she. "These accuse me because of inhumanity; but he accuses me because he hates me."

"And why does he hate you?" asked Mme. Montclar, with consternation.

"I do not know, only he hates me," replied Estelle, breaking into tears.

The next evening a charity concert, organized for the benefit of a family of fishers, would take place in the large hall of the principal hotel of St. Aubin.

Everybody had promised to take part in the good work, either as artists or as spectators, and the tickets had doubled in price in the kindly hands. Madame Barrière and her two daughters had purchased seats, with the intention of selling them at the highest price possible, and they succeeded as they hoped to.

André Bolvin, promoted to the rank of commissaire, rendered to everybody an infinitude of little services, and was admired for his kindnesses and for his happy faculty of being able to get out of difficult positions.

The hall was filled with sounds as sonorous as those of a German spinning-top at the moment when Mme. Montclar entered with her niece, having

paid a hundred francs for their two seats, accompanied by Madame Daubray, who was self-embarrassed almost to extreme inquietude.

The seats were numbered. Estelle and her aunt reached their chairs which were in the first row; the second was already occupied by Mme. Barrière and her daughters and a company that they had formed. Close to Mme. Montclar were two or three officials of Saint-Aubin, who were always invited to the solemnities.

The entry of Estelle and her aunt in their mourning, according to the circumstances, of strict black, with no affectation of crape, produced an extraordinary sensation; the girls of the country stretched their necks, and even mounted upon the chairs to see them. The noise which arose upon their entry subsided suddenly, and the silence that succeeded seemed almost solemn; then the murmur of voices again arose, little by little, in the hall, the aisles became clear and behind a door one could hear the three regular taps.

At that moment Estelle, who had felt for some time something extraordinary, turned around sharply and saw behind her that the second row of chairs was entirely vacant. The prudent company of Mme. Barrière, not less wise, had vacated theirs, leaving a vacant space significant enough between the black sheep and the rest of the company.

Mme. de Beaurand did not make a movement, nor did she speak to her aunt. The concert commenced. She endured her punishment patiently until the end; but when the first part had been finished, she drew the attention of Mme. Montclar by a simple word

murmured in a low tone. Both rose and went toward the door. Upon their way, the spectators looked at them, giving them a wide passage. With deep silence under a fire of eyes, they went through the foolish crowd and returned to their rooms. When Estelle was alone with Mme. Montclar, she looked at her without tears in her eyes.

"Well," said she, "do you not think that the duty of Raymond, since he would not take me with him, was to live to protect me?"

CHAPTER XV.

The question at that time was simply this: Ought they to retire in order to avoid a new slander, or ought they to stay with their calumnators, holding them in absolute disdain? Mme. Monclar was of the latter opinion.

"What?" said she, "do you wish to retreat before these wicked tongues? Would you pay them the honor of attaching any importance to their prattle? But my child, those people to us are nobody. Of what weight to us is their opinion?"

"They do not exist to us," said Estelle sadly; "but we exist to them. They disquiet themselves with that which we do. They are hundreds and we are alone."

"But then," said Mme. Monclar, with a little irritation, "they say that we are alone in the world, like Prometheus bound to his rock. We have friends and when we return to Paris will gather them around us. While waiting, it seems to me that Mme. de Polrey, who has not disturbed herself on account of you during the summer, might show you some mark of sympathy; invite you to her home."

Estelle took from her blotting-case, a letter received that evening and gave it to her aunt.

In response to a letter in which her ex-pupil informed her of being installed at Saint-Aubin, Mme. de Polrey congratulated her upon having found such a quiet place where she might terminate, without disturbance, the first six months of

her widowhood. "I would wish very much to see you at our home," said she in closing, "but our house during the harvests will be very full, and the hunting opening at an early hour, there will be such noise and movement as will not be in accord with your recent mourning. Say, however, to your good friend Mme. Montclar, that I count, in compensation, upon both of you being here during the next autumn."

Before finishing the letter, the old lady was obliged to re-adjust her eye-glasses three or four times; her blood literally boiled in her veins, so much so that she showed her anger at that tranquil insolence.

"In no plainer way could one be shown the door," said she, returning the letter to Estelle. "I will show her in my turn that they are wrong to thus break with people of whom they may have need. Her three daughters are not yet married, thank Heaven, and more than once she may wish to depend on my kind offices. She will find the door closed. I'll answer for that. Then you did show a desire to see her?"

"No," answered Estelle, "but she had such great fear of my visit that she has taken this precaution in advance."

"One could not be better advised," said Mme. Montclar. "Well, my niece, if you will trust me, we shall remain here two or three days more, in order that it may not be said by these persons that they have put us to flight, and then we will travel by short days, making the tour of Normandy and Brittany, and in October, when we shall have

returned to Paris, we will take counsel of experienced people. It would be much too odious, if"—

She did not finish the phrase. Estelle was seated near her, and looked at her with eyes full of tenderness and a kind of pity.

"You think that I am raving?" said Mme. Montclar, answering the look.

"I think, my dear aunt," said the young woman, "that you are full of grandeur and goodness; I said to myself that the wisest thing would be for you to disembarrass yourself of me, to return to your friends, to your relations and to your customary habits. I am not your niece, even though you give me that title. You do not know me; hardly as they know the young girls in society, and thus, with no right to your kindness, I have thrown in your life so much sorrow and distress as I believe was never known before. If you will permit me"—

"You wish to enter a convent?" interrupted Mme. Montclar.

"No, I haven't courage enough, I assure you," answered Estelle. "It is too recently that I terminated my education. I would not, without profound discouragement, return to the impressions of my childhood. But might I not live alone, modestly, as it should be, in my widowhood?"

"Of that there can be no question," said the old lady, with firmness. "The name which you carry would never permit an independent nature like yours to hurt itself. We have dreamed of being happy parents; Fate has willed that this desire shall become a cause of sorrow. Let us accept its will. You will remain near me, my niece, as long as I

live. After—God will provide. And then," added she, with a smile, in which resignation mixed with pride in a peculiar manner, "I am attached to you, Estelle, more than I could have believed. I have found in you so many of the things which make me think of Raymond, and I do not know what else; there are points of contact, peculiar affinities between your nature and mine. In short, such as you are, I would have loved to have had you for my daughter. Then speak no more of quitting me."

Estelle leaned over to the beautiful white hand of her old friend and placed upon it a reverential kiss. Mme. Montclar pressed her in her arms, and they separated silently.

Their programme was very easy to realize. Upon the morning of the next day André Bolvin had departed for Paris, very much worried by the trick of Mme. Barrière, which he could not have foreseen.

That of itself was very embarrassing; her little *coup de tête* should never, in her idea, have taken such considerable proportions, but she had reckoned without the sheep of Panurge, and now she beheld herself responsible for all that might result from it.

Her elder daughter, after the departure of Bolvin, did not cease to reproach her, weeping; and, to turn attention, she had been obliged to organize long walks to the interior of the country in order to avoid the frequent meetings upon the seashore. That miserable trick has disconcerted everybody; a renewal of silent consideration made itself felt upon the two women, who left the bathers at Saint-Aubin under an impression of trouble and distress, almost of remorse.

After two or three days, Estelle liked the journey. Mme. Montclar was an excellent guide; avoiding useless fatigues, she let nothing of true interest escape; she showed, besides, a sincere desire for distracting her companion. Upon her part, Estelle was very apt at assimilating all new ideas. Under the superficial direction of Mme. de Polrey, she had seen very few things, and asked but to instruct herself. They visited thus the old chateaux, Roman churches, the ruins of all sorts which are so frequent in Normandy, and journeyed thus toward the Mont-Saint-Michel, sometimes by rail, sometimes by carriage, following the occasion or their fancy.

One afternoon they were traveling in an old two-horse calèche across the great plain of Lessay; the wonderful abbey, of a purely Roman style, remained behind them after having received their visit, and they went toward Coutances. The plain extended around them upon all sides covered with fleecy furz like to a rough sea. Estelle respired the penetrating odor of the heather and wind thyme which characterized the country.

"I do not know why," said she suddenly, "I think of Rosalie, the *femme de chambre* of my mother; her remembrances were of the plains, such as this, which I had never seen, but of which she spoke to me."

"Did she live here?" asked Mme. Montclar.

"No, she was born in Brittany. I do not know where. I have forgotten it, for she told me; but I have forgotten so many things of my childhood. I did not wish to remember them."

The prairie was at last passed and the steeples of

the cathedral of Coutances arose like a glorious apparition upon the heavens gilded by the setting sun. After the unavoidable preliminaries of installation in a hotel, Estelle and her aunt walked toward the wonderful church, one of the most perfect in the world.

Notwithstanding the already advanced hour, the sacristain proposed that they go immediately to the summit of the tower which crowned the transcept, in order that they might see the setting of the sun. Mme. Montclar being much fatigued, declined, but she requested her niece to go, and the young woman obeyed.

Ascending, one after the other, the narrow staircases upon the inside of the walls, she followed her guide for a long time. She perceived that she arose only when the loop holes let filter upon the steps a ray of amber light. At last, all at once, she found herself upon a platform in the open light. It was like a stroke of intoxication when she came into the open azure. To the left, nothing but a balustrade of broken stones; under her feet, the town already half-hidden in the dusk of the twilight; above, the delicate blue heavens, of an exquisite purity; all around, a darkened horizon, confounding the trees and the clouds in an indistinct line, and before her, to the west, a fiery furnace, where the clouds were gilded like burning glass; the sea surrounded by black rocks which were the isles, and all bathed in a purple and violet light which slowly changed its place and color.

A tender melancholy overcame the soul of Estelle, and she thought of the Indian widows who burned

upon the bodies of their husbands; a large island upon the horizon seemed to her like a gigantic mausoleum. Would she not have liked to have disappeared with Raymond in this beautiful mingling of the sea and sky? Without doubt, she did not love him, but then do widows who are almost children know what love is?

"No more for me," thought she with a kind of pity for herself.

She filled her heart with this strange spectacle; but she must go for fear of being imprisoned by the darkness in the labyrinth of staircases; she turned away with a feeling of regret, and after a descent that to her seemed almost eternal, she reached the nave.

After coming from the splendors of the sky, the church seemed dark. Estelle could hardly distinguish Mme. Montclar who was half sunken in a chair. In a window of the sixteenth century, illuminated by a reflection which one might have said was an aurora, was distinctly shown a group of souls in agony. Naked, their hands joined, at the door of Paradise, their emaciated faces depicting such intensity of prayer and agony, that the soul of Estelle was crushed.

As she lowered her eyes, she saw a form kneeling a few steps in front of her.

It was an aged form; in the style of the Bretons and the Normans, she was dressed entirely in a mantle of a thousand pleats, like the widows and the orphans. The pleated capuchon, deep and black, covered her head and half fell upon her forehead. Struck by the originality of the costume half monichal and of an imposing solemnity, Estelle stopped.

The face draped in darkness looked up, and Estelle saw two black eyes fix themselves upon her and her mourning dress. The expression of those eyes, upon beholding her, became all at once tragical, the features became contracted and similar to these of those wretched souls of whom Mme. de Beaurand had so much horror. The hour and the place filled her with a sort of sacred terror, and as she tried to read that sad physiognomy, a half-forgotten face arose in her memory.

"Rosalie," said she extending her hand.

The woman clothed in black glided between the chairs and disappeared in the gloom, without answering. Estelle passed her hand over her hallucinated eyes and returned to her aunt, whom she led out, into the open air.

"You seem to be troubled," said Mme. Montclar to her.

"I thought that I just saw the *femme de chambre* of my mother," said she, "but perhaps it was only a vision."

CHAPTER XVI.

The next day a slight rain fell which prevented all excursions.

Estelle went to the cathedral and submitted the sacristain to a rigorous examination. Who was that woman? Did she live at Coutances? Does she attend the church?

The good man knew absolutely nothing; he had not noticed her more than any other; many religious women came to the church in fulfilment of some vow, and they go away immediately; he did not know them. And Estelle could learn nothing.

However, upon reflecting at leisure, she became convinced that she had neither been deceived nor had she lost her mind; it was really Rosalie whom she had seen. For truly the habits of that woman might have taken her to Coutances upon a pilgrimage; but then why that expression upon her face? Estelle was sure of having been recognized, and a coincidence of resemblances could not have produced such a result. Was it remorse for having tormented her unhappy childhood? The supposition seemed to be possible, and it was there that the young woman stopped, regretting not having spoken with that girl. However, now that her past life appeared under a new light she wished to interrogate Rosalie upon a thousand details concerning her mother and herself; she left Coutances with the regret which one bears upon leaving remarkable things, and the sadness which had left her for a few

days returned and beat heavily upon her. After having patiently awaited a change in the weather for three days, the two women, in order to cut their journey short, returned to Paris; there, at least, they should not feel themselves transpierced by the frosty humidity of the equinoctial winds.

Upon their return, Mme. Montclar informed herself upon the whereabouts of those friends who were in the city or in its immediate vicinity; the number of which was not large. She managed, however, to see them. They gave her the most cordial welcome and promised to visit her. With regard to Mme. de Beaurand, their attitude was different, according to their surroundings and temperaments. At certain houses, they informed themselves about her with a poorly dissimulated curiosity; in others, they affected to speak as little of her as possible, and in all, Mme. Montclar obtained the certitude that her niece was gravely compromised.

"Listen to me," said she to one of her oldest friends whom she went to see at Saint-Germain. "You will have to take me as I am, you know, I believe you have learned that, during the forty odd years that we have known each other. Well, I am with my niece and for my niece and I shall remain so until the end. Then, if you care for me you will have to arrange for us two together."

"My dear friend," answered she, "I will speak with a frankness equal to yours. If I were alone, I would also brave the world by your side, but I have a married son and a son-in-law, and it would be impossible for me to expose their two wives to the annoyance which one may see would be brought

upon them. I will go to see you alone, with much pleasure; I will go upon your day in the afternoon; but do not exact of me that I shall take my daughters or my sons."

"I understand," replied Mme. Montclar, "a year ago, or only six months ago, such language would have disgusted me. Since then I have acquired very much indulgence for the children—*faiblesses*, and I ought to say, that it is Mme. de Beaurand who has taught me that virtue. And, moreover, I do not become angry with you for having said to me what you have just said. I thank you even for reserving for me so much esteem, for not putting me aside; but even that should not hinder me from thinking that at my age, you believe me foolish enough to infect myself with the presence of an unworthy woman, unworthy of my esteem, for if I understand, at bottom, that is your thought."

After some circumlocutions she admitted it.

"Well, my dear, I did not think, assuredly, that such a catastrophe would ever come to your family; but since such is the case, I should most sincerely hope you may have pleasant associations with a woman like Mme. de Beaurand. And now, whenever you will have the kindness to call, you shall be always welcome."

After two or three visits of this sort, Mme. Montclar had made a very pretty collection of persons disposed to mourn with her; that which is one of the worst forms of unkindness.

She did not become dejected, being endowed with a character at once despotic and chivalrous which gave to her in such trying circumstances a heroic and dignified attitude, at once, worthy of her race.

However, she at once felt the weakness of her situation. In a family in which there was but one male descendant, if he should die, all would be wrecked and it was that which happened to the Beaurands, even without the formidable manner in which Raymond had disappeared. In order to sustain two isolated women, the arm of a man was necessary, and that man did not exist. Then, at the end of her resources, and without having consulted Estelle, who had never had this idea, Mme. Montclar wrote a long letter to Theodore Benoist, asking him to come that she might speak to him.

"You have been," said she to him, "the best friend to Raymond. With that title, I ask you to come to the succor of her who replaced his mother and of his widow." When he received that letter, Benoist was in full harvest. An exceptional harvest was upon them like an amber river, the ripe grapes in the presses made wine without effort; the vats filled full of the new wine the odor of which entered even to the hillside, where the robust fellows and the pretty girls were gathering the fruit.

After having thought for about half an hour, Theodore with the letter in his hand went to find his mother who was seated outside watching the vintagers go toward the pressing cellars, carrying upon their heads, baskets of grapes, according to the old idea.

"Mamma," said he, with that soft appellation of childhood which did not seem strange upon the lips of the man when he came to ask confidence of her, "will you read this?"

The old vintner cast a quick look upon her son

who turned his head, and read the letter slowly, with care. The large easy writing of Mme. Montclar was not difficult for her to decipher, but she wished to understand even the smallest words.

"I believe, my son," said she, upon returning the paper to him, "that with them there are great difficulties for you; but you know what I have said, I do not believe myself that the widow of your dead friend is a criminal. Her aunt does not believe it any more than I, and I believe that she and I are right. Even though we are in the middle of our work and you are absolutely needed here, go and see what you can do and do what you can. These ladies are alone in the world, worse than alone, since the world looks upon them with ill will. Be a man and above everything else be just. And then, return from there when you can, for there is much work here and I am too old to do it alone as I once did." She looked at the vintagers, who in an uninterrupted train were mounting toward the cellar and descending with quick steps, with laughter and with pleasantries.

"I understand you, mamma," said Theodore, leaning over her with tenderness, "and I thank you."

"Wait a moment, my son; yet one word more. I have said that there would be much trouble for you there; there will be in more than one way. That lady is of a high family, and can care nothing for a vintner."

"Well, my mother," interrupted Benoist, with a shade of rudeness, "it isn't a question of such things. Have I not told you that I can not be drawn from

my idea, and she knows it well. I can not force myself to like her, and I am sure that she detests me."

"Well, my son, carry the load. And if it prove too heavy, come and bring it to your old mother. She will not be able to console you in such sorrows; no one could console you, but she will love you and that will help you."

In the presence of all these people, young men and women so happy, they could not kiss each other, they exchanged a long look full of tender and profound thoughts.

"Then, I will take the train at five o'clock," said Theodore; "it is now four; I have yet time."

He went to the house, and shortly afterward came out ready for the journey. He had taken off the suit of red velvet, the dress of the chasseur or proprietor, and appeared correctly dressed, as all Parisians demanded.

"I like you better as a vintner," said his mother, looking at him. "You have the air of a Monsieur; otherwise, you are my son, a vintner, like your father."

"In any dress, my mother, I am your loving son," said he, kissing her, this time ceremoniously.

The vintagers stopped upon the threshold of the press-room, surprised to see him with his valise in his hand.

"To morrow, my children," he said to them, in a strong voice, "the day isn't yet finished, and there is yet enough light for you to work a couple of hours more; the presses demand that you work."

They answered him with a joyous "good-day," and the files reformed upon the side of the hill.

"Return to-morrow or the day after," said his mother to him, accompanying him to the threshold of the court. "You know what you will have to do; I have nothing more to say."

He looked at her from his beautiful, profound eyes with an infinite tenderness.

"You are a true woman of God," he said in a low voice; "my father was very happy with you, and I am proud of being your son. Go, mamma, go reign over all the people who respect you and love you. With your bonnet of white linen, you are more a queen than many of those who wear a crown."

He kissed her once more, and then looked at her going away. With a quick step she returned to the presses. He saw her say a word of encouragement here and a word of reproach there, always without rudeness and without flattery. She seated herself, gilded by the rays of the sun, which was rapidly declining, surrounded by baskets of grapes like a rustic Pomona in all the splendor of her rural divinity.

"My dear saint of a mother," said he with a look of adoration.

The train was in sight upon a curve of the Loire, under a white bank of steam which rolled among the poplars. The puffing could be heard repeated in echoes.

Theodore took his way, arriving at the same time with the train, and rode on toward Paris, while the clearness of the setting sun made an aureole over his hill.

CHAPTER XVII.

Theodore was somewhat troubled when he presented himself at the house of Mme. Montclar. In his portfolio he had the little package given him by André Bolvin, and in another pocket the famous envelope. Why were they separated? He could not say. Many times he had repeated to himself that his duty was to unite them immediately. However, it had never been done.

Mme. Montclar received him in her own salon with a certain effusion, very different from the cold attitude which she had observed formerly. With the first look, Benoist observed that she was very much changed. The stroke which she had received by the death of her nephew had continued to produce its effects, even though she seemed to have recovered, and, to those who had not seen her for some time, it was evident that her health was greatly broken.

"I have asked you to come," said she, "notwithstanding the inconvenience that my precipitate call might cause you, because I found myself in a pass, and that, alone, I could not get out of it. It is not that I lack advice, I have old friends and I have men of affairs; but I recognize that my friends care nothing for me and that the men of affairs can see nothing here. You were the friend of Raymond, I believe you to have always borne enough esteem and friendship to inspire in you some affection; help me and I will bear you the most grateful thanks."

All this had been said in a calm tone; but the voice trembled slightly and the beautiful face of the old lady showed a profound emotion. Theodore himself was affected. In a few words, he assured Mme. Montclar of his devotion and asked her to explain to him that which had come upon her. She told him then of the adventure at Saint-Aubin, then of the welcome which their friends had extended them.

"It is clear," said she at last, "that it will be impossible for us to be in society this winter; well, I shall never permit these miserable calumnators to be an obstacle to my social life. From my birth until this day, I have always walked with my head high and I shall die thus. They wish me to abandon Estelle. I shall never abandon her: she is a Beaurand, she carries now the name of my father, that would be enough to make me protect her, if for other things she merited no regard."

Theodore had heard this with deference, he seemed to wait for her to add something else, but since she was silent, he said:

"What is it you wish of me, Madame?"

"That you shall aid me in denouncing this infamy and in clearing up the innocence of my niece. We must have means to search. Have they not said that she killed her husband, because she had blood upon her robe? You know well that she did not kill him."

Theodore moved. The enormity of that accusation struck him violently and he seemed dazed.

"No, she did not kill him. I would be ready to swear to that," said he with vivacity, "that is truly monstrous."

"Ah, you will help me to defend her?" asked Mme. Montclar.

The young man felt himself taken by all his uncertainties.

"To defend Mme. de Beaurand! From what my dear lady? My intervention would be but disagreeable," said he.

"If you have confidence in her, you will find a way," said the old lady with a little bitterness. "Unhappily you also are of the number of her enemies."

"Permit me," said Theodore, trying to clear himself.

"I have thought that your chivalrous spirit would force you to vanquish the antipathy which you seem to bear my niece; I see that I have deceived myself."

Mme. Montclar turned her face and tried furtively to staunch a tear. She felt real humiliation.

"My dear Madame," said Benoist, "be sure that my sense of justice is strong enough to make me correct any error. I have believed, I admit, that Mme. de Beaurand might know something of importance which we knew not, and which might throw a new light upon the mystery of the death of Raymond. Until now, I have been unable to make myself believe that she knew no more about it than do we, but between that and condemning a woman—a woman in a situation so terrible, delicate and sad as hers, there is a great distance, believe me." He was animated, while he talked, he thought he could hear the voice of his mother repeating to him her councils of prudence and justice and he felt himself to be between his first impressions and his new emotions and it seemed that he could not refuse to do better than correct his judgment.

"Well, Monsieur Benoist, I ask of you one thing," said Mme. Montclar with vivacity, "see my niece, speak with her, try to know her. She does not raise herself voluntarily, but she has that right and I am sure that you will quickly perceive it. Who knows! Perhaps in your conversation, if she should see in you a friend, she would tell you without question, something which would help you to comprehend or penetrate the horrible mystery. Raymond had perhaps some motives, but I can not think so. Try, Monsieur, to obtain her confidence; though very young, she has rare sense, sometimes more than I who am older—Alas! oh, so old."

With a weary air she leaned upon the back of her armchair, and Benoist saw to what a degree she had been overcome by care.

"I would hardly," said he, "be able to gain the confidence of Mme. de Beaurand, but, dear Madame, for you there is nothing that I am not ready to undertake. You have already been so good to me, when I was at Saint-Cyr and when Raymond took me to your home, and afterward and always ——"

"My dear child," said Mme. Montclar, putting her hands upon her eyes to hide the tears, which burst forth, notwithstanding, and ran between her fingers. "It is a very strange thing to say; but at this moment I have no other friend but you; and my niece has no other friend but me. It is necessary that we work together. You see there is no way in which we can be separated—until death."

She fainted and her head fell upon the back of the chair.

Frightened, Benoist rang the bell; the waiting

maid came, and immediately afterward Estelle entered.

"It is nothing, Madame," said Benoist to her, taking a step toward her; "Mme. Montclar has but shown a momentary weakness."

Estelle thanked him by a motion of her head and ran to her aunt, who, under her delicate hand, opened her eyes. Without power yet to speak she made a sign to Benoist which he understood.

"Madame, your aunt," said he to Estelle, "desires that I should say something to you in confidence; she wishes me to bear it; in order to show myself worthy of it, it is necessary that I should declare myself her servant, respectful and devoted, and yours also, Madame."

He had ended this sentence without looking at her. He raised his eyes and saw that the young woman looked at him with firmness.

"I thank you, Monsieur," answered she.

"Give him your hand, my niece," said Mme. Montclar in a feeble voice, almost like a breath.

Estelle put forth her hand, fine and loyal; her eyes said: "My old friend wishes that we declare peace. I consent to it in order to please her, but you may remain of your own opinions."

In the look of Benoist she read a sadness which might be a reproach or regret—what more she could not know.

"We will resume this conversation later," said the young man to Mme. Montclar, "for to-day I think you have need of complete repose. If you will permit me I will return to-morrow."

Too weak to answer, she gave him her attenuated

fingers, which Benoist kissed respectfully. He went toward the door. Estelle walked a little behind him and also crossed the threshold. When they were in the neighboring room the door closed behind them and they stopped and looked at each other.

"Monsieur," said Estelle, "I do not suppose that your opinion of me has been modified by the words of which I have been the subject. To please my aunt you have believed it your duty to hold sentiments which you do not believe. I thank you for her; be certain that I do not misunderstand it.

"Madame," said Benoist, making a violent effort to speak in a firm voice, "Mme. Montclar has manifested a very great desire of seeing me a true friend. I could not answer that request if I came to you otherwise than with sincerity."

She cast down her eyes and they both remained motionless; her soul full of violent thoughts; inexplicable sadness that words could not remove, that of which the mind could not divest itself. During the four or five months that they had thought of each other constantly, with passionate anger that almost amounted to hatred, what had they not spoken of each other without the other's hearing? The remembrance of these vehement and mute apostrophies arose between them and hindered them speaking.

At last Benoist put a hand in the pocket, where he found the portfolio, and took it out. He took the package given him by Bolvin and after an imperceptible movement handed it to Estelle.

"I should have given you that a long time ago," said he,—"pardon my tardiness. These papers are the last that Raymond ever received."

She took them with a perfectly firm hand.

"They were given me," continued he, "by the magistrate who had undertaken to discover the circumstances—his mission was entirely friendly and has not yet ended—these belong to you."

She threw her eyes on the little paper which contained so many things and which really contained nothing; then she looked at Benoist.

"Is that all?" said she.

He was ashamed before that honest look with a bitter sadness, but with an invincible pride. His fingers moved nervously over the portfolio and he was very near taking out the envelope. But the remark of Bolvin returned to his memory: "be careful of it, I would not be surprised if some day the letter should be replaced in it." He returned the portfolio to his pocket and said, "that is all."

They remained silent for a moment before each other.

"I thank you, Monsieur," said the young woman, at last. After a short hesitation, she added, "for this and for the care which you have taken of my aunt. She is ill, worse than she appears; that which happened at Saint-Aubin dealt her a terrible blow. I think she will not live long—then I shall be alone. But so long as she lives, so long will she have love for me—for you, be good to her, Monsieur."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Upon rising the next morning, Theodore Benoist was surprised to find himself in a smiling disposition of mind, almost gay, something which had not occurred to him for a long time.

That man of grave thought, of a serious heart, had not, to speak properly, worn out his youth.

A disappointment in love at the age when these things have a decisive influence upon certain characters had left upon him a sadness without bitterness; but accompanied by a sort of discouragement. The great love and the profound respect which he bore his mother had hindered him, from dispraising women in general; but he did not feel a desire to recommence a like trial and love never comes to any but those who seek it; he had passed in an austere manner the years which the greater number of men dissipate in pleasures and *aventures amoureuses.*

It was at once to him a strength and a weakness. Without doubt, having reserved the freshness of his impressions and the energy of his will, he was well armed for the combat of life; but he ignored many of the snares, and, above all, those which one innocently spreads for one's self, where thousands of the most worthy are the most easily taken.

Benoist would not have wished to have deeply loved Mme. de Beaurand. The old remains of dislike, the yet unexplained mystery enveloped the young woman, to his eyes, in a captious atmosphere,

almost frightful; he saw her as one respires an air charged with intoxicating poisons, with a sort of fear almost of anguish.

Truly, he had struggled against himself during the peaceable summer passed near his mother, in the large and easy life of a country proprietor; the certitude that Raymond had killed himself on account of Estelle had not ceased to haunt his mind. All at once, he asked of himself, once or twice, if the cause of the suicide had not been in Raymond himself—but then, why should his friend have trembled before an avowal when he was upon the point of preferring death, and Benoist put aside the idea.

The mere fact of having hesitated in such an absolute conviction, however, brought on a distressing tension of the poor fellow's nerves; the sight of Estelle no more irritated and revolted against his suspicions, but saddened almost to humiliation by the undeniable injustice of the opinion, brought him to a new condition.

He liked her better thus than in anger and indignation; his heart now counselled indulgence, possibly pardon for that creature so rudely chastised for a certain mishap, and assuredly, out of proportion, he believed it now with the terrible effect that had followed it. That Estelle was guilty of an imprudence, of inconsequence, possibly, he would admit. A grave fault! He didn't believe so even for a moment.

Her sad youth, her real isolation in the midst of the world, were they not sufficient facts to excuse her? And whatever could have been her error, was

it not cruelly punished? Was not a little indulgence due her?

These vague and fugitive ideas visited the sleep of Benoist; his awakening had that peculiar sweetness of the mornings which followed great efforts of will, examinations for example. With a leisure very different from his usual custom, he dressed himself, breakfasted and went out, finding the air balmy, the passers by pleasant and Paris admirable.

By the order of Mme. de Beaurand, he was received upon the *rez-de-chaussée*. The large hôtel was very sad in its luxury, the waxed floors glistened like ice, the paintings and the gildings, restored for the marriage, glistened in the silence and the solitude. Theodore was very much affected upon seeing this suite of rooms, full of noise and of movement when he had been there last; moved by an unreflecting impulse, he entered the little salon where he had exchanged with Raymond the last words, where they re-affirmed their tender friendship and from there he returned to perceive the retreat where his eyes had rested upon Estelle while she was speaking with her friends.

There, where he had contemplated her in her white nuptial toilet, he saw her now coming toward him dressed in mourning. Possibly she had grown taller; certainly her form, already so noble, was more slender and graceful; her step was very firm and more grave than before; one felt that the load of her life weighed upon her young shoulders without making them bend. Rapidly, as if he had suddenly become aware of an indiscretion, Benoist stepped to meet her.

"Pardon me," said he, "I could not avoid walking here, it was here that I saw Beaurand for the last time."

Estelle looked the young man in the face, her eyes went straight to the bottom of his soul, and he felt all at once that he could no longer suspect her, even of the most venial fault. A great shame with a profound feeling of repentance entered Benoist; he bowed his eyes, incapable of saying anything and slowly as a submissive dog, followed Mme. de Beaurand, who went to a salon near the hall.

"Mme. Montclar is suffering," said she, seating herself and designating a seat for him upon the sofa.

"She is confined to her bed, and asks that you excuse her; besides, yesterday, I believe, she explained to you that which preoccupied her. The sickness is without remedy—at least, so it appears to me; however, if it is possible to discover anything to assure my aunt of rest, it will have to be found at any price whatever; but for that only."

"Only," asked Benoist, touched by that self-abnegation of which he felt the sad and hidden effort; "and for you, Madame?"

She raised her head proudly.

"For me?" said she, with a softness that her gesture did not betoken; "I need nothing I hope for nothing. Why should I preoccupy myself with those things which do not affect me? Mme. Montclar loves me and esteems me, that is sufficient."

Theodore felt wounded, but his wound caused him a sadness without irritation; had he not merited that, even a hundred times more?

"Madame," said he, in a low voice—

He stopped, as if to implore pardon of that woman, so kindly if deeply offended. The mere fact of excusing himself, was not that also another offence? She awaited that which he wished to say, because he had begun to speak.

"Madame," said he, with a great effort, I understand and I admire your devotion to Mme. Montclar, but it is not for her alone that you have to struggle, it is for yourself also."

"O for me," said Estelle, with a gesture of thanks, "if I had the misfortune to lose my aunt, the opinion of the world would be of little consequence."

"They see in the world, however."

She shook her head negatively.

"I would go into a corner of the province," said she; "I would become useful there if I could; I would quit the name which has brought to me such a load of sorrow, and I would live tranquilly under that of my mother—Mlle. Brunaire. They would say of me, 'she's an old maid.'"

She laughed lightly, a little laugh, short and sad. He heard it.

"And those who love you?" said he, feeling, himself, the absurdity of that word and not being able to retain it.

She looked at him with profound astonishment.

"But there are none," said she. "My friends of youth are broken from me by the catastrophe. And then, with money, can I not make friendship more or less firm, no matter where?"

Benoist kept silent for a moment, seeking some means by which to disclose his thought. She studied him with a secret satisfaction; to see before her

her old enemy in trouble was a pleasure that was mysteriously enjoyable.

"You are, then, undeceived," said he at last, "and so young."

"One must be, you will admit," said she, a little drily. "Then, Monsieur, I would have, for you, infinite thanks if you would do what you can to tranquilize my aunt, and even to that end I have said to myself—but shall I give you a bad opinion of me?"

Theodore received full in his face the look of Estelle, which said to him: "Have you not a bad enough opinion of me already, and without reason? Is it possible that I could add yet one thing more?" His own look answered: "Cast no more upon me, I pray of you."

"I have thought that, if you would help me, we together might form a complot to give to Mme. Montclar a pleasant illusion. She is very ill, and I am afraid that her days are nearly ended. Our mourning and her state of health will probably hinder her going out this winter. It is you who will be charged with communicating with the people outside. Could you not, Monsieur, say to her that there has been produced a sentiment in my favor, or simply that they no longer speak of me? That would doubtless be true. The world does not occupy itself for any length of time with the same subjects. It would have been, of necessity, a truly extraordinary circumstance to make me a toy for this length of time. Will you not, Monsieur, aid me in this truly charitable work? That excellent woman has not merited the misfortune which they have"—

"No more have you, Madame," said Benoist, rising.

She lowered her eyes to taste the strange sweetness of that speech, and they remained silent.

"As for me," said she, with an altered voice, "it matters little. I have told you"—

"It bears upon everything you respect," responded he, bowing.

She arose also; something choked her and hindered her saying a word.

"Monsieur," said she, so low that he had to bend his head in order to understand, "you believe no longer that it was I, or on account of me"—

He bowed so deeply he almost rested on his knees.

"Madame," said he, in the same choked voice, "pardon me for having been so miserable—it was because I loved my friend more than myself"—With an unreflecting movement, she held out her hands, which he seized and pressed strongly. Their fingers did not separate, and they remained face to face, smiling, the eyes of Estelle glistening with tears, those of Theodore half-closed, for he contained his. She took a deep breath.

"Ah, Monsieur," said she, "I thank you. At present my load seems less heavy to carry."

They spoke amicably during the few moments; but that which they said was foreign to their true thoughts. Benoist soon took leave.

"Do you wish me to return?" said he; "has Mme. Montclar need of me?"

"No," responded the young woman. "Now, we do not desire to take you from your mother, who must be distressed over your absence. We will see each other this winter."

They parted in the great hall, so cold, so white; but each one's soul was warm and clear.

CHAPTER XIX.

A summer already prolonged beyond all seeming possibility detained at Saint-Martin, far from Paris, those whose duties did not imperiously recall them.

Silence and abandonment continued to reign at the hôtel de Beaurand; except a few humble souls, of those whom necessity or reconnaissance attached to the fortunes of the rich, Mme. Montclar received very few visits, and Estelle received none at all.

Great was her surprise when one day she found herself called upon by Mme. de Polrey. The chilliness of the weather had prevented Mme. Monclar taking the air for a couple of hours in her carriage, as she often did, accompanied by her niece.

The first intention of the young woman was to not answer. Was there not something outrageous in that visit, made at a time of day when no visits were made, and following an inexcusable silence?

However, a quick reflection changed her feelings; she must know what Mme. de Polrey had to say, it would perhaps be interesting, and certainly instructive; and more, it was probable that the good woman, in presenting herself at the time of day when Estelle and her aunt commonly took the air, counted upon not finding them at home, thus allowing her to merely leave her card, and the satisfaction of taking her in her own trap was not to be disdained. She who had, according to the expression, served as mother to Mme. de Beaurand, was somewhat disappointed at seeing her introduced; but

then one must not always hope to find the people out, upon whom one calls from necessity. Besides, she was not displeased upon her part, to see what sort of a face a woman accused of such a crime would have. Escorted by her two daughters she went into the salon where Estelle was waiting to receive her.

"My dear child," said she when they were seated. after the unavoidable kissing, "I could not wait a moment to tell you of the good news that has so filled our house with joy. Your two friends and companions of childhood are affianced to two of our worthy gentlemen friends; the one is a country gentleman, and the other is a lieutenant of the 10th regiment of Hussars; my two daughters are much pleased, and my two sons-in-law are carried away, and they will celebrate the wedding upon the same day."

"I congratulate you most sincerely, my dear lady," said Estelle.

She looked at the companions of her childhood, who truly seemed to be satisfied with their lot, and congratulated them also: the young girls were not after all, responsible for the prudence of their mother. She astonished herself by answering with a ceremonious politeness, much different from her old familiarity.

A storm of remembrance assailed Estelle. There were the friends whom she had left some six or seven months before, in her childhood's room, pressing around her, placing here a flower upon her person, there a jewel, pleased with their role of maids-of-honor, and hiding, the elder at least, for the younger was sincerely attached to her, a real jealousy, under the covering of the most tender friendship.

Oh, but that was a long time ago. A lapse of twenty years, a crown of white hair like that of Mme. Montclar replacing the black locks of the young woman could not have marked a more profound or a wider gulf. In a moment Estelle drove away that impression, and the sadness about to seize her disappeared, and was replaced by a proudness, bordering upon disdain.

"Be happy, my dear friends," said she, with a great freedom of mind, "happiness knows no absolute conditions, everyone arranges his to his own taste, and I hope that yours will be easy and true."

Upon each of the little noses appeared a commanded smile, each of the little mouths proffered a few words devoid of real sense, but very à-propos, and the two pairs of eyes turned toward their mother, who ought then to have something to say.

"The marriages are set for the twenty ninth," said Mme. de Polrey with a slight inquietude; "it is sad that your mourning will prevent your attendance, perhaps you will come to the mass, however?"

"Heavens," thought Estelle, "but she is afraid of my accepting. She deserves a beautiful very formal "yes," but then that is not worth my provoking them."

"I can not," said Estelle aloud. "Mme. Montclar is suffering. The twenty-ninth, that is within eight days, I believe? I do not believe she will be able to bear the fatigue of the ceremony so soon, and I never go out without her."

"You are right," said Mme. de Polrey, visibly relieved; "however much we may regret it, we can not help approving you."

She rose to go; the young women accompanied her to the hall. The elder of the girls said suddenly:

"You will come to see my trousseau, will you not, Estelle? It will be on exhibition Monday and Tuesday; it is not as rich as yours was, but, however, it is not bad."

"Yes," said the mother, somewhat troubled, "you might come in the morning, or better about half past one when you will be sure of meeting no one; at that time you will surely find us alone."

Mme. de Beaurand smiled. That little bit of insolence, innocent as it might seem, which would have profoundly wounded her two months before seemed to her irresistibly comical in her insensibility.

"Be not disturbed," she responded, "I will go at a time when I shall meet no one; it is not so long since I left your house, I know your customs yet."

"It is on account of your mourning, you understand" said the younger, who had blushed with shame as she heard her mother say that.

She was a good little girl, yet little enough habituated to the ways of the world to think of herself alone.

"I understood, my dear child," said Mme. de Beaurand, putting her hand affectionately upon her shoulder, "and I thank you. I thank you also for your visit Madame; have the kindness to remember me to M. de Polrey."

When the three women were in their carriage the mother proceeded to scold the foolish child severely for having made such a terrible blunder.

"Can you imagine the effect she would have produced had she come at five, among all those people?" said she upon terminating her homily.

"It is, however, necessary that she should see what they have given us!" said the young girl with a sulky look. "After all her trousseau was not so much richer that ours, rich as hers was."

"She answered very nicely," interrupted Odette, "and she showed much tact. When I am married I shall see her."

"You will do no such thing," scolded her older sister.

"At least, if my husband does not prohibit me, you will see if I don't see her," replied the little rebel. "And if he is mean enough to forbid it I shall not love him at all. She was very kind to me, while we were in the convent, and I love her very much. And I don't think she was ever capable of doing anything wrong, not a thing, whatever they may say."

"There, that is enough," said Mme. de Polrey. "Do not get angry my daughters, for then you would spoil your complexions, and we have yet ten or eleven more visits to make before dinner."

After having talked over with Mme. Montclar the question of whether or not she could, with propriety accept Mme. de Polrey's invitation, Estelle decided in the affirmative. Consequently the next Monday, for the first time since the day of her marriage, she crossed the threshold of the house which had been, or which seemed to have been her home for a dozen years.

She was greatly moved upon seeing her old room decorated for the occasion, the same as it had been for her; it was she who so few months before had run from one table to another, lifting delicately with the tips of her fingers the laces and the silken stuffs,

as her old friends were now doing. With what child-like joy did she blow the pleats of her marriage dress, overjoyed with it being so beautiful! She remembered how upon the last evening, alone in her room, into which she could not now enter, she had tried on the jewels, placing them on her bare shoulders before the glass, those jewels that had come from her mother. How the stones glistened upon the delicate satin of her young breast, and how the diamond stars scintillated in her black hair. The radiant vision of that moment, the last of her maiden freedom, made the tears come to her eyes as she brushed the ribbons that knotted the trousseau.

"Estelle," suddenly said an almost childish voice in her ear, "when I am married I shall go and see you; do you want me to—say?"

Mme. de Beaurand turned around quickly, and saw raised to her, full of a generous light, the eyes of Odette, of whom at the convent she had so long been the little mother.

"You?" said she, seized with tenderness and joy. "Then you have always loved me?"

"Oh, yes. You shall see my affianced—he is very kind. I love him, and he is so good you will love him, too. You will come and dine with us at our house, will you not? Listen, I will set that service for you," said she pointing to a table loaded with silver and damask linen. "That is my best."

Estelle looked about her. At the other extremity of the salon Mme. de Polrey and her elder daughter were holding a great council with the milliner. She seized the yet too meager young girl in her arms, and kissed passionately the little chubby face, at that moment of an almost ideal beauty.

"You are a dear little darling," said she in a very low voice, "and I shall always love you for what you have just said to me. May God bless you for your charity and return it to you a hundredfold in Paradise. You have truly to-day given a cup of cold water to a sufferer."

"Then you will come?" questioned the child, who did not half understand.

"We will see each other later, when you wish; but no more now."

She put between herself and Odette the interval of a step or two, then turned toward Mme. de Polrey, who came toward her. Speeches and still speeches, and polite deceits, and Mme. de Beaurand left the house of her childhood. Alone in her carriage she felt so much alone that she burst into tears. As she staunched them, with a delightful sensation, the image of Theodore Benoist displaced that of her "*petite fille.*"

CHAPTER XX.

The marriage of the Mlles. de Polrey took place with great pomp. Mme. Montclar and her niece sent their cards in return for invitations, and a telegram upon the day of the marriage. That evening Estelle had secretly sent to her young friend a very precious jewel, chosen for her with a half maternal solicitude. Both of the young couples left the city at noon, each one to its fate, and Mme. de Beaurand felt that Paris was a little chillier, a little more hostile when the little woman had left with her husband.

Benoist had returned after a longer silence than usual. His mother felt very much fatigued, a little weakened, by superintending an unusually large harvest, and, he having vainly pressed her to accompany him to Paris in order to consult the faculty, he finally remained with her. This sacrifice had its reward very soon. The repose of the winter and the feeling that her son was near her, soon brought to her cheeks the color of which Theodore was so proud; the black eyes had again their usual brilliancy and vivacity, and the quiet smile that gave so much charm to that face, returned every time the face of her son appeared. They lived together in the large house, pre-occupied apparently, by different thoughts, but which were not sensibly different, for they thought continually of each other.

A cold day of December covered the panes of the high windows with frost and the reflection of a slight fall of snow gave a peculiar charm to the

crackling of the big beech log in the fire-place. Theodore buried in an arm-chair, read a paper; Mme. Benoist, with active fingers was knitting long woolen stockings for her son to wear in March, when he should go to superintend the cultivation of the vines.

"Theodore?" said she, sticking one of her needles under her linen cap.

He looked up, torpidly and voluptuously lazy.

"You have the air of being extremely content, my son," said she, without stopping her work. "Are things going as you wish them to?"

He could not resist smiling, and his mother removed her look from his good eyes.

"As I wish, mamma, that is to say a good deal," said he, "because I do not know very well what I want, except to see you happy and well. But if it is of my cares that you are speaking, I may say that they are better."

A light of satisfaction shone upon her face, which was clear of the tan of the summer; white under the white bonnet, with a light rose blush upon her checks, she was a veritable picture of domestic peace.

"Then you know why your friend committed that bad act? No? Then why are you free from care? What has happened?"

"I have reflected upon your counsels and have found them good; the person whom you know so well, has pardoned my folly and my unkindness."

"Ah, you have spoken to her?"

"I saw her; she is now caring for her husband's aunt, who has not long to live, the poor women have had

more than their share of sorrow. Imagine, that they have accused Mme. de Beaurand of having killed her husband, I know the contrary to be true. It is the horribleness of that calumny that has made me bethink myself. I am no more foolish, nor any more wicked than any others. At last it is finished and I am easy."

"You gave her the letters?"

Not daring to lie he made a sign of the head that she took for an affirmation.

"And you yet know nothing?"

"Nothing."

Mme. Benoist knitted with a singular energy.

"You never thought," said she, in a half tone, "that your friend, when he was young, had perhaps made an imprudent promise to some woman? A promise to marry her and I know not what? I have often thought of that and I have asked myself if proud as he was, if he had not lost his mind upon being called a dishonest man; once married he could not, however, undo it. You never thought of that?"

Theodore leaped from his chair and walked with long steps through the great dining room.

"No. And it is astounding. That is an explanation. It is prodigious, and it is to you that the merit is due that the idea was discovered. But in the whole affair I have conducted myself like an ass. I was stubborn enough to remain quiet. Mamma, you are one of the most extraordinary women I ever knew."

He took between his hands the well shaped head of Mme. Benoist, and kissed her two cheeks repeatedly, after which he returned to his chair and sank into an attitude of meditation.

"You may be right," said he, after a few minutes. "But alone I can not make the thorough search it demands. But that would be impossible."

"What?"

"It will necessitate looking over the papers of Raymond to find something that would point toward such a thing; but how get the papers?"

"Demand them of the widow," said Mme. Benoist, tranquilly, who had recommenced her work after having re-adjusted her hair.

"Of her?" asked Theodore.

"Indeed, you can not hurt her, I think. It seems to me that it is to her interest that the truth be known."

After an instant of silence, she laid her knitting upon her knee and looked at her son.

"You see, Theodore, that if it were I who was accused of such a horrible thing, I would not sleep day or night till it was cleared up."

"No more does she sleep," said Benoist sadly.

"Then if you are her friend you ought to render her the sleep of which she has so much need. And lastly, if you please, or if you do not please, it is an affair between you and her; for your duty as a friend, as much of the widow as of the dead captain, is to discover the truth."

"You are right, mother," said the young man, rising; "since you have no more need of me——"

"Yes, you may go now, since I am well and have not much to do. But listen to me my son. You understand that I love you and that I am desirous of your happiness. If that woman should come to love you and she had only unhappiness in her life,

then it is well for her because you are a worthy fellow and have always acted properly. But I am an honest woman, as was my mother before me, and as was her mother before her; our house has never had any but good women, and should it please God they will always be such. I would not have it so that they might point at her and say: 'She was the cause of the death of her husband; and the proof of it is that they have never been able to tell why he killed himself.' They must know, however, why it was. If he lost his mind the doctors must say so. In short, my son, it makes little difference if they have calumniated your wife if you can prove to the people that it was false. Otherwise, I shall witness your marriage with sorrow. It is because of that that I tell you to search and to find."

"You speak like wisdom itself and I thank you," said Benoist, kissing respectfully the old wrinkled hand that had taken the needles again, and knitted fast to make up for the lost time. "I shall have to go to work."

A few days later Benoist presented himself at the hôtel de Beaurand. Mme. Montclar was better and received him with visible pleasure. The poor woman was fast failing; but she only half realized it.

The winter had brought to her a few of her old friends, aged ladies, independent, that is to say out of society, who put their habits above their prejudices; having passed all or a part of their evenings during twenty years at the home of Mme. Montclar or of Noël à Pâques, they could see no reason why they should not continue to do so still. With an indifferent politeness they had accommodated

themselves to the presence of Estelle; and she had besides rendered herself agreeable to each one of them in a discreet way, and her aunt was rejoiced as though by a happy presage.

The visit of Benoist instead of returning them to unhappy remembrances, as she had feared it would, gave the old lady great pleasure; she asked him to dine with them. He did so, hoping in this way that he might the more easily see Mme. de Beaurand alone; he was, however, deceived, for Mme. Montclar would not permit herself to be separated from Estelle; after several unsuccessful attempts, he decided to write her asking for an interview with her alone.

She was much surprised by that odd step, which caused her no little worry; however, she responded by fixing a day and an hour when she knew Mme. Montclar would be occupied by business with a man of affairs.

Her heart beat a little louder as she descended into the salon of the *rez-de-chussée*, where she had received the young man three months before; that day had been of much importance in her life so suddenly transformed that she could not think of it without a tremor of joy. Nothing of that emotion showed upon her face as he advanced towards her holding out his hand.

In a few words he excused himself for his *démarche* and made her understand that nothing but a very grave motive would have prompted him to do so.

"You have discovered something?" said Mme. de Beaurand with a feeling of interest.

"No, but my mother said it was my duty to search in all directions."

"Your mother?" interrupted Estelle. "Your mother has had the goodness——"

"My mother esteems you, and loves you as should every right-minded soul who knows of your sorrow."

Estelle looked down. What a divine light these words were to her sorrowful heart. There was one woman in the world who cared for her and who was sorrowful on her account, and yet who did not know her. Without doubt since Benoist had done her justice he had explained it.

"It is my mother," said he, devining the thought of Estelle, "who understood your situation. To do her justice, I should say that she opened my eyes."

Estelle raised her right hand lightly to impose silence; he obeyed the gesture.

"That which I wish, and it is something that I hardly dare ask, is permission to look over the papers of Raymond, the letters of his youth, to see if we can not find some trace of some occurrence."

She looked at him attentively, then bowing her eyes, became profoundly absorbed.

"You are right," said she, after a silence. "I will conduct you to his apartment."

CHAPTER XXI.

Mme. de Beaurand opened the door of the high, dark room, where Raymond had found death. All was in the same order that it was upon that fatal day; the furniture of waxed oak glistened, without a speck of dust, the candelabras held their candles, upon the writing-desk the familiar objects occupied their ordinary places. Benoist felt his heart tremble as he crossed the threshold of that chamber of death; the ghost of his friend seemed to be floating around the room above his head in the obscurity of the pannelled ceiling. He entered, however, following Estelle, who had gone several steps in advance toward the fireplace; she stopped, her eyes fixed upon a spot on the floor, visibly affected.

"It was there that I got my robe in the blood," said she, in a low voice. "That blood will forever rest upon me, and God knows that I would have given all of mine—"

She went no further; controlling her emotion, she went toward the closet, and, opening it with a key from a bunch that she carried, she took from it three others, which she gave him.

"Do your duty, Monsieur," said she to him; "in that writing desk and in that stand you will find all, I believe, that will be of use to you. I thank you in advance, and I will await you in the room above."

"You will leave me?" said Theodore, embarrassed, taking the keys. "However, your presence would be justified."

She looked at him with a tranquil and profound look in her eyes.

"Where we now are," said she, "in this matter the ordinary conveniences are far behind us, and we can not recall them. Think then, we are here, you the friend, I, the wife, of the dead, to search in his life for some wrong, some error which will permit me to lift my eyes from the crime of which I am accused. And, however, God knows that I respect the memory of Raymond as much as do you yourself."

She made a gesture, sad and resigned, as she moved toward the door.

"Pardon," said Benoist, "but I can not open the desk; the key will not turn."

She returned and bent over the table, and, with a little difficulty, she unlocked it; the drawer opened, showing the orderliness of the deceased in the arrangement of the papers and the objects which it contained, and which had been respected by Bolvin.

As she arose, with a light sigh she looked at the carved silver case that had contained her photograph. Empty, it occupied its ordinary place. Michael, upon leaving the hotel to enter as a guard upon the lands of the Beaurands, had put all things in place, and had transmitted a positive order to the valet to replace it. Estelle threw herself a little forward, as though frightened.

"My photograph," said she, in an altered voice; "who has taken my photograph?"

Benoist did not answer. The half-burned débris of the forgotten photograph returned to his memory,

and he trembled at the fugitive thought that perhaps Estelle was not innocent. That was not a light.

"Raymond had my photograph upon his writing-desk; he told me so a hundred times; we bought the case together in the Rue de la Paix, while purchasing jewels. It was I who gave it to him. What can have become of my photograph?"

She looked at the young man with eyes wild from distress, and of one can not know what mysterious anguish. He was ashamed of himself, and felt that he should speak.

"Before his death," said he, very low, "Raymond destroyed it; I found some remains of it in the fireplace."

"Monsieur," said Estelle, in a choked voice, looking at him with a supplicating expression, "that can not be!"

"It is the truth," said he, as much affected as though he had pronounced a sentence of death.

She carried her cold hands to her head.

"My God," said she, almost without breathing, "what could they have told him? What infamy could have troubled his mind to make him inflict such an outrage upon me?"

She leaned upon the back of a chair, tottering; Theodore put out his arm to sustain her, but without daring to touch her. She fixed upon him her great black eyes, softened by the bitterness that was almost terror.

"Tell me, Monsieur, what is it they could have written him about me? What have you thought since you no longer believe that it is I?"

He interrupted her, crushed to the bottom of his soul to hear her talk so simply, without rancor or anger, of the outrage which he had inflicted upon her.

"Madame," said he, with firmness, "since I have had my eyes opened, I have come to believe that my friend, de Beaurand, must have lost his mind, to cause you such sorrow and to inflict upon you so much disgrace. One stroke of insanity would explain it—and excuse his action."

Estelle was a little re-assured, and she looked at the half-open drawer.

"Poor Raymond," said she, suddenly appeased and consoled by the words she had just heard, "there was perhaps a secret in his life. Search, Monsieur; who knows if we should not weep over him, when we know the truth?"

She passed before Benoist, saluting him with a queenly bow, and went out, closing the door noiselessly. The young man who had followed her with his eyes, sighed when she had disappeared; in her clothing of black laine, she seemed to have taken away all the light of that mortuary chamber.

Resolutely, his teeth clenched, with a sort of internal madness, he examined package after package, drawer after drawer; the smallest envelopes, the smallest boxes were examined with a widely different kind of persistent attention from that with which they were examined by André Bolvin; the entire life of the unfortunate passed in review under his eyes, which had become attentive and impassionate, as those of a judge. The day was closing, and Benoist lighted the candles of a candelabra and

continued his work; at last, when he had assured himself that nothing had escaped him, he closed the drawers carefully, having first put all things in their places, and then placed the candelabra upon the mantel.

His eyes fell upon the picture of the General, which was clearly lighted, and he was held as though under a spell.

A hundred times he had seen that work without being affected, in any unusual way, or particularly interested; he was, however, now attracted to it as though to an enigma. It was to that picture of his father that Raymond had, in all probability, addressed his last words; they found him before it; what did that man, condemned to die by his own hand, say to it? Was it a reproach? Was it a pardon or a prayer that rose from his lips before they closed forever? Could that picture have heard why the Captain killed himself? Would it have borne witness to the innocence of Estelle? Now he was trying to revenge the death of the husband. He must preserve from infamy the name of the wife.

Benoist took the candelabra again, stepped back to be able to see the portrait better; he felt a peculiar sensation, a kind of fascination, in looking into those black eyes so full of tenderness and will, the features well drawn, so the old picture did not lack a delicate grace. Raymond had not the eyes nor the hair of the General, though they resembled each other; but it was not the resemblance between the father and the son that struck him, it was something else unexplained and unexplainable. He, also, died in the full flower of life, and none knew why he died, nor who shot him.

That man must have been irresistible, thought Benoist, as he placed the candelabra upon the mantel; that portrait possessed a charm which he had never met elsewhere. At another time it would not have produced this same effect upon me; it is now only that I can explain what it is that makes Mme. Montclar adored by all the people. It is her eyes.

Those eyes followed Benoist for a long time in his work and in his dreams, those profound, tender, black eyes, full of energy and kindness.

He went out of the chamber full of strange impressions, almost superstitious, and mounted the staircase to find Estelle.

She awaited him, calm in appearance; in reality, in deep anguish. On seeing him, she made a gesture of interrogation, so light that he hardly saw it.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," said he.

Mme. de Beaurand showed no surprise, but discouragement was depicted upon her beautiful face, and Benoist contemplated it with silent emotion.

"You have accomplished a very distressing task. I know not how to thank you for it. We must now abandon all hope."

"You are not sure of that," said Benoist, preoccupied. "Are you well acquainted with the life of General de Beaurand?"

"Very little. Raymond loved him passionately, but he lost him when very young."

"Have Mme. Montclar tell you all that she can about the life of her brother. It is thus that perhaps we shall discover something."

He was at the end about to retire. Estelle approached him to speak to him in a low voice.

"My photograph! My poor photograph! that gives me more trouble than I can ever tell you, I had never returned to that room. It is not because I was afraid; I never knew childish fear; but I never knew why I should go. Then you think Raymond died cursing me?"

"No," said Benoist, speaking contrary to himself "I can not believe that. He knew you, he appreciated you; no one could change his opinion thus in a minute."

"Then why did he tear it? However" —

"It was, perhaps, that nobody might touch it after him," suggested Benoist, at hazard.

The explanation was not satisfactory, however, it slightly appeased the anguish of Estelle, who, at that moment, downcast by her long waiting, was very easily convinced. She held her hand to her ex-enemy, now become her ally, and they parted without further adieu. Before returning to Mme. Montclar, she was inclined to go in her turn and search the drawers of Raymond's writing desk. To what good? Had Benoist not examined them all faithfully? The confidence which she had in that enemy of but a few days since was profound and inexplicable; she resolved to trust absolutely in him.

Benoist was no less quieted by his long search. In breathing the damp, cold air of the Boulevard Saint-Germain, he heard murmured in his ear short phrases, sometimes in the voice of Raymond, sometimes in the voice of Estelle. The eyes of the General followed him until he saw them twice in the faces of the people whom he met. A third time, he stopped short under a carriage way; a woman poorly

dressed, half-famished, young, bearing bouquets of violets, in a pannier under a door, silently implored the pity of the passers-by with her soft, dark eyes, which resembled those of the portrait.

I am haunted, thought the young man. If this should continue, I believe I also shall lose my mind.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mme. Montclar went out no more; the chilly air outside burned her because she had become almost of a morbid sensibility. The doctors questioned, had counseled that they should manage it so that the interior apartments should have pure air, as frequently as possible without exposing her to the coarseness of winter. She lived in an artificial atmosphere as nearly natural as possible, her niece having by her delicate attention gathered around her a circle of old friends, of old *habitués*, who could possibly give to her the illusion of society. The poor woman became weaker day by day asking only that they should wait upon her and without troubling themselves.

This wreck which had been the flower of a good Parisian company, bore to Estelle neither cordiality nor coldness; they accepted her as a part of the hôtel, she did not trouble their conversation nor was she troubled by their whist. Their tea or their light cup of chocolate was very acceptable, served by her beautiful, delicate hands, and even in thanking her, they did not dole out their smiles. Some of those who, notwithstanding their age, had not abdicated their pretensions would have voluntarily taken it upon themselves to introduce her to the Court if the miserable story had not thrown upon their aspirations a sort of light crape, slightly disconcerting.

Estelle knew that not one of these amiable men, not one of these polished women had for her a word

of kindness, good will, or even of compassion. She knew that upon the day when she should lose her aunt, that band of friends, more or less gormands, and very egotistic, would disappear like a band of swallows upon the day when the table should cease to be set; but she was careful to not mention this to Mme. Montclar. Upon the contrary, she praised to her, when she found occasion, the good grace and the kindness of these people, desirous, above all, of giving her until her end, all the illusions possible with regard to herself.

"You will not be entirely alone, after I am gone, my child," said the old lady to her one day, "I will leave you my friends as a legacy, and they will help you in making other friends before disappearing themselves. All the people are not so bad as the blockheads at Saint-Aubin. Look at Monsieur Benoist. Have you not found in him a true friend?'

"And besides we have his mother for a friend," said Estelle, trying to please her aunt.

"His mother? He has one then? Ah, yes, a worthy woman, who attends the vineyard, I remember. He is not of the aristocrats, the young Benoist; but he is, however, extremely well-bred. There is no place like Saint-Cyr, you see, to school a son. Raymond had a great regard for him, very high. What is he doing now? Working at chemistry? I believe. He has spoken to me about the fats. More than that I know nothing. Who have we to dinner this evening?"

Estelle answered all the questions that Mme. Montclar put to her; but her mind was elsewhere. The manner in which the old lady had just spoken

of Benoist had deeply wounded one cord of which she herself had, until then, not known the existence. This protectorial, slightly disdainful tone, in speaking of the vintner and of his mother, had hurt her more than as though she had spoken thus to her own self. Until then she had seen in Benoist only the moral man, once her judge, now her ally, always the friend of Raymond; she became aware, suddenly, that he had also a social life, had occupation, friends, relations of which she had never through. Without doubt, Benoist is a plebean name and chemistry is a modern science, but does that divest the man of any merit that would make him useful?

Estelle had never had aristocratic prejudices; her mother who belonged to the nobility had married a simple *citizen*. Mme. de Polrey professed no opinions except those of perfect submission to society. The young girl had created for herself a little philosophy upon seeing at the convent names and the origins of the most diverse natures, obtain like friendships and equal rewards. The manner in which Mme. Montclar had classed Benoist in an inferior degree seemed to her monstrously unjust, and created in her a short revolt. Her good heart and her reason, however, told her immediately that the old lady had no malice toward him; her affection had received no blow; but she felt in herself a great desire to compensate the unconscious victim of that little unknown humiliation, and the esteem which she had for the young man on account of it was suddenly augmented.

Mme. Montclar had invited Benoist to come up on any evening when it seemed proper to him. He

came on a Sunday; but he felt himself so completely a stranger to the guests that he felt troubled and ill at ease. Estelle seated herself at his side to talk with him. Suddenly he became aware that they were looking at him, and a burning blush covered his face. Could he have betrayed by some imprudence the secret he had hardly dared admit to himself? These cold, indifferent, almost hostile beings, had they perceived that he madly loved the widow of Raymond de Beaurand?

That idea became so intolerable to him that he became, as it were, paralyzed. Estelle, surprised at not hearing him answer, looked at him attentively; he believed himself discovered and making pretext of an important affair, he excused himself and went out.

The mind of Benoist was in an indescribable trouble. Since he had made peace with Estelle and himself, since his mother had talked to him with such entire confidence, he had let the cares of his soul sleep. A sort of moral lethargy had come over him, he had allowed the most important thoughts to remain idle, the inquietudes which brought insomnia, and had lived only from day to day, taking each morning that which life needed to exist.

In all passion, as in all tempests, certain calms present themselves, then the struggle seems to have terminated. One does not disturb one's self with that which was devouring upon the evenings before. The most painful sorrows, the most distressing qualms of conscience are appeased. One believes willingly that they have ceased to exist. It was thus that Benoist lived during several months, yet the curious look of a few old women, would throw him suddenly into a sea of sad perplexities.

First, and before all, it was necessary to hide from all eyes that absurd senseless love.

Blinded by her motherly love, Mme. Benoist had been able to speak of marriage. At the moment he had found it very natural, but in the hôtel Beaurand, Estelle appeared to him under another light.

A sort of an instinctive and secret fear had often driven him from his love. The widow of Raymond became almost sacred to him. Was it not a sort of sacrilege to love the widow of his friend, when so little time had passed since his death? What would Estelle think if she knew that he had loved her since the first day of her widowhood, even when he believed her culpable? Would she not be indignant? Later—yes, that would be different, and then according to the express conditions of his mother it was necessary to take to the Pressoirs a woman clear of all suspicions.

Descending to the bottom of his heart, Theodore preceived then for the first time that his suspicions of Estelle had not been dictated, as he had believed, by cruel concurrence of circumstances and by his friendship for his brother-at-arms, but it was a sort of jealousy, an instinct of anger and revenge, born of an unavowable love for her who had chosen Raymond.

I have always loved her, he had said to himself, if Beaurand had lived I would have hated him for all the love that she bore him, but she did not love him.

A divine light drove away the shadows where the conscience of the young man was debating. She did not love him, he told himself, and Fate had

willed that she should be a widow and maiden, a white soul, without remembrance, without restraints, innocent and calumnied, at liberty to choose him who should be able to make her love him. The face of Estelle presented itself to his mind, in all her immaculate purity, as the Virgin appeared to the Saints in the desert; moved to the bottom of his soul, he was inclined to join his hands before the exquisite face in asking pardon of her for so many errors, so many offenses, those which she knew as well as those which she had never expected. Then the vision disappeared, and he found himself before the reality; he adored the rich woman, who belonged to the aristocracy, and who, without doubt, cared nothing for him. A woman stigmatized by the opinion which his mother and himself never admitted at their fireside without desiring that the truth should come to light, and he felt the weight of existence fall upon his head like to the lid of a coffin.

An idea truly new to him glided then across his mind. Until then, he had seen in Raymond but a victim; for the first time he asked himself if the unfortunate were not himself guilty in disappearing so suddenly from the eyes of the world. He had divested himself of a multitude of duties, the first of which was to assure his wife of a position worthy of her; insanity alone would excuse this, as he had already said, but Raymond was no fool. Never had he been more master of himself in his thought and in his language than in their last conversation.

A dull, profound anger boiled slowly in the heart of Benoist. His friend had betrayed friendship,

betrayed love, betrayed honor, in quitting life without leaving a word which would explain his disappearance. He had acted like a coward—a coward—

Benoist, alone in his room, which he paced feverishly, took his head in his hands and implored pity of his dead friend.

"I am a wretch," said he to him, "but pardon me, for I suffer cruelly. Behold, I injure you because I have the misfortune to love your wife."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Mme. de Beaurand was seated at her writing-desk about ten o'clock in the morning, revising the accounts of the month. Still a novice at the exercise, she went at it with the fervor and the feeling of a neophyte; the least details were examined and verified as though they were accounts of the state.

"What a misfortune," thought she, stopping in the middle of a column of figures, "truly, what a misfortune it is to be so rich. Not knowing what to do with one's money, it is spent in useless things. This great house peopled with domestics, horses in the stables—of what good is all this? Would not one be as happy in a house less grand, with a less complete service and less sumptuous equipages?"

She remembered at that time the joyous apparition which she met one day upon the route to Bourgogne, near the Chateau de Polrey. It was a little English carriage, drawn by a fast pony in full mane and tail, with a brass and silver-mounted harness of tawny-colored leather. A young man held the reins; his pretty little wife laughed as she looked at him. They passed so quickly that Estelle could not see them distinctly enough to recognize them afterward. What was necessary to be so happy?

One might, with the wealth of the Brunaires and that of the Beaurands combined, purchase many such ponies, harnesses and carriages; but that laugh, which the wind carried over the field of yellow grain, the carelessness of love, where could she have gotten that?

Estelle felt a profound melancholy envelope her like a net; her life seemed to be closed to all things. She had once been young and gay; but of what good is youth if one lives like the aged? Of what good is natural happiness if one is condemned to live in eternal solitude? Who would love her? Who would marry her?

A sudden blush overspread her face, and she re-commenced her addition at the top of the column as though the figures could not wait. The door of her little salon opened; she paid no attention to it, supposing that at that early hour it was the maid come to put things in order; suddenly two little gloved hands covered her eyes, and a fine odor of violettes floated around her.

"Who is it?" said a voice, vainly disguised.

"You, Odette—My darling," said Estelle taken with a joyful surprise; "at such an early hour? Where do you come from?"

They kissed each other and seated themselves side by side upon a narrow sofa with their hands joined. The new bride blushing under her toque and her violettes, looked at her "ex-little mother" and said with admiration:

"Oh, but you are beautiful! More beautiful than ever before!"

"And you," said Estelle smiling, "you have changed very much, you are as pretty as heart could wish, and you have grown."

"Oh I, it is happiness," said the young wife with animation. "We have been all over, at Rome, at Florence, at Venice, at Arles, at Dijon, and in the chateau of my husband's parents. There, for example, it

is not gay in the winter. My husband was with me, happily."

She pronounced "my husband" with a comical and tender gravity which made Estelle almost laugh and cry.

"My husband is charming," she continued, "he adores me."

"And you?"

"I also, naturally. Only I never tell him so. But I know that he knows it all the same. He is such a rogue."

She began to laugh and look around her.

"It is very pretty here with you, prettier than it is at our house, but little as it is, it is nice all the same. You know my husband is young, he is twenty-seven; he is very handsome in his uniform of Lieutenant of Hussars; the uniform of the Hussars is very pretty. I want to have me a dress of blue cloth, of that blue, with black Brandenbourgs—like a cantinière, to carry the colors of the regiment. But he is going to be transferred into the Chasseurs, then we will live in Paris."

"Is it long since you returned?" asked Estelle troubled she knew not why.

"Yesterday. Mamma waited for us at the station with papa, we are to dine with them this evening. We had hardly arisen this morning when Hubert went to la Place; do you know what it is, la Place? I do not dare to ask him. I have already asked him so many questions that I am ashamed. He pretends that I ask him the drollest—I don't know—I ask him whatever comes into my head; and he laughs over it like a fool. Now I am more prudent; I try to

inform myself elsewhere. You see he has gone to la Place and while he is there I came to see you. My sister is in Spain with her husband, they will freeze there. That is all right. I don't like my brother-in-law—he is now—between you and me, he is only a fool, only a brute. He'll have a thread to twist with my sister.

Estelle listened, smiling, to this flood of words, broken by childish laughter, that innocent joy, that confidence in her marriage, in her love, in the life which opened a window upon the unlighted future. From the prison in which she had been shut six months before, it seemed to her that, as far as she could see, rolling at the horizon, were verdant plains, peopled with happy beings. Her kind disposition, the exquisite tenderness with which she had been endowed, hindered her from feeling the least envy of a happiness that could not be hers; the pleasure of hearing her old "little girl" prattle gave her a maternal air, quite touching in her young face. She caressed with her hand the yellow hair which, at the convent, she had so many times smoothed. Who could have told her that the days of study and of restraint would, within ten months after her marriage, be remembered so sweetly, with so much regret?

"Now you," said the little wife, as she placed a new kiss upon the cheek of Estelle. "Wait, here is a bouquet of violets that I bought for you. Imagine, I came on foot—on foot and all alone, without a waiting-maid—I, who never before put my nose out of the door without being accompanied. It is awfully amusing. Do you ever go out on foot and alone?"

"No," said Estelle, thinking that she had never even thought of using that privilege. "But it is different with me."

"Oh, yes, that is true," said Odette, looking at the still austere mourning of her friend. She hesitated for a minute, and then continued: "Is it true that which they tell of you? Tell me."

"What is that, my dear?" asked Mme. de Beaurand, her heart beating distressingly.

"That your husband killed himself upon the day of his marriage?"

"It is true"

"Upon returning from the church?"

"A little after; after you had gone."

"You do not know why?"

"No."

The little Mme. d'Aulmoye was perplexed.

"You know that they speak very ill of you?" said she, regretfully.

"I know it."

"But as for me, I never believed it," added she, with vivacity. "I shall love you always, my 'little mother.'"

A kiss punctuated that sentence; then Odette, turning her muff over and over, said, without looking at her friend:

"But then it is as though you were never married."

"Almost," answered Mme. de Beaurand.

"Poor Estelle, you have had nothing but sorrow. If I should lose Hubert—Oh!"

She shivered, and her little face became pale.

"Then you are happy?" asked Estelle, to turn her thoughts.

"Happy! It is Paradise. That is what marriage is. I don't know if my sister is of the same mind. I dislike that punctillious good man of a husband. He is bald, with whiskers. He has the air of a notary—a notary who does not amount to much. But he has the money; he is worth more than we. He is a vintner, a vintner of Bourgogne. As for me, I like the Army better. I must go. Only think, what if my husband should return and find me absent? Nobody knows where I am."

"You will tell him?" said Estelle, suddenly becoming grave.

"Yes, yes," said the young woman, lightly. My dinner is ordered. I hope the cook will not have put the eggs in the water before my arrival. You remember at the convent there was a student who could eat nothing but hard eggs, because her mother's cook put her point of honor upon being always exact? *Au revoir*, my 'little mother.' Soon. I will go and call a carriage. That will be amusing. I have never paid for a carriage in my life. Have I lost my pocket-book? No, here it is."

She searched her pockets with a comical anxiety She stopped upon the threshold and cast a look around her."

"Poor Estelle! always alone. I would die of sorrow if I were alone now. But you, you never had a husband at all. To be a bride two or three hours, that does not count. And he was dead when you saw him?"

"Yes," said Estelle, gravely.

"It is horrible. And then not to know. He was insane was he not?"

"I hope so," answered the widow, but the young wife did not hear it

When the little friend had gone she went into her room scented with violets, truly all alone; a bride of two or three hours, that does not count. What life lacked so much as hers?

She walked slowly to her desk and took her book of accounts. The addition recommenced seemed to wish to make her desist, for it would not be ended; the rebellious thought of the young woman would not remain upon the figures and would continually revert to Odette, in the little apartment carpeted, anew, elegant and decorated like a marriage basket, where a Lieutenant of Hussars was going to meet her. She could see him enter, his eyes sparkling, his lips half open; he would laugh to see her at her breakfast. Upon the dining table was a bouquet brought by her husband, the water and the wines sparkled in the decanters in a ray of light that had just pierced the clouds, they seated themselves before their egg cups and their hard boiled eggs, and laughed again.

Pushing aside the book of accounts, Estelle placed her two arms upon the table, buried her head in them like a little dispirited child and wept hot tears.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The service in commemoration of the death of Captain de Beaurand, was celebrated at the end of the year in great pomp at the church of Saint-Thomas Aquinas. Mme. Montclar had obstinately sent letters of invitation to all her old relations notwithstanding the timid observations of Estelle, and she would serve an *acte de présence* upon all whom she could say were her friends.

"He was my nephew, almost my son; I owe him this last proof of my tenderness."

The old lady had grown more and more petulant for some time, the great generous flame which had enveloped her at the moment when her niece was attacked, was extinct, allowing to escape only a few isolated scintillations; the approaching death of which she was not entirely conscious caused in her, nevertheless, from time to time, a sort of fear which translated itself in melancholy, and sometimes in bitterness. Estelle who suffered without murmuring, thought that the longest patience would not suffice to pay the affectionate protection which had been extended her.

Mme. Montclar attended the service with her niece. She was very badly impressed upon seeing what a small number would give to Raymond this last proof of affection and to her that solemn mark of deference; the ordinary habitués, the furnishers of the house and enough of the curious formed all of the audience. The old relation, who had represented

the family upon the year preceding, dislodged for the occasion, occupied the first chair with the weary air of a man condemned to an inevitable and disagreeable duty.

Affected with a secret disquietude, Benoist observed and kept in mind the faces and their actions. There was much talking in that indifferent audience. He listened till he was fatigued, trying vainly to hear something. At last the general absolution was pronounced and he went to Mme. Montclar to ask permission to assist her to the carriage while the old relation would, if he had room, receive the salutations of the company already three-fourths dispersed. The old lady thanked him with dignity; but instead of allowing herself to be accompanied by him, she followed the master of the ceremonies and placed herself near the entrance.

"Aunt," said Estelle, "I beg of you, let us go."

Mme. Montclar made a gesture of decisive refusal and remained immovable.

While the defile, which was short, passed, she stood with head erect not counting her friends present, but those absent, with a haughty bitterness. All eyes were fixed upon the two women, both so beautiful and so imposing. They spoke in a low voice around them. Estelle suffered martyrdom, but she gave no evidence of it. Finally the last of the curious went out, the old relation approached Mme. Montclar, who said to him in a half voice:

"I thank you, my cousin."

A little girl from among the crowd very near her pronounced these words:

"Is it the old or the young one, say mamma, that killed her husband?"

The voice resounded like a metallic distinctness along the sonorous stones. All those that were scattered in the aisles turned to see. Benoist made a violent gesture, seized the arm of the child and cast her aside with a rude word. He returned quickly to the two women. Mme. Montclar leaned on the arm of her relation. Estelle only looked with an unexplainable sadness at the unconscious one who had just inflicted that most mortal injury.

"Take my arm Madame," said Theodore aloud.

Joining the gesture to the words, he led to the carriage the young woman who had become weak.

"Get in, my cousin, get in, Monsieur," said Mme. Montclar to the two men who had accompanied them.

Silence reigned in the landau during the short journey from Saint-Thomas Aquinas to the hôtel de Beaurand. Mme. Monclar climbed the steps of the outer staircase and entered in the salon of the *rez-de-chaussée*; Benoist who had taken Estelle's arm conducted her to a chair.

"My friend," said the old lady struggling against her feebleness, "I thank you. I was wrong."

Her eyes closed and she lost consciousness.

Estelle recovered her strength immediately; a real danger always found her ready to face it. Mme. Montclar was taken to her bed and revived. Her physician, who saw her go out with extreme repugnance, arrived at that time to see how she bore the new trial; he ordered repose and absolute silence. Mme. de Beaurand returned to the salon, where the two men awaited her return. The old relation, after some commonplaces, returned to his pleasures

and his habits. Benoist remained standing, ready to go.

"Monsieur," said Estelle, "will you give me a moment?"

"I am entirely at your service, Madame," he answered.

"Then will you follow me?"

They went to Raymond's chamber, which she entered with him.

"It is here, Monsieur," she said to him, "where nobody will either hear or trouble us, that I wish you to answer me. After the insult to which I was just subjected, there is nothing that I will not do to find out the truth. You are the last person to whom my husband spoke confidentially. Upon your honor, tell me what was your last conversation with Raymond?"

Benoist frowned. He had never before been placed in such a delicate situation. However, thus begged, he could not do otherwise than answer.

"Since you demand it, Madame," said he, "I will obey you. In that conversation, truly confidential, my friend, de Beaurand, confessed to me the absolute tenderness which he felt for you; he stated it in such terms as I have not the right to repeat, but which proved a passion unbounded."

The face of Estelle, ordinarily pale, was covered with an ardent blush; she awaited the rest without raising her eyes. Benoist had stopped.

"And then," said she, seeing that he spoke no farther.

"Then, he expressed the hope of seeing one day that tenderness returned."

"I had very much affection for him," said Estelle.

"He was not ignorant of it, as you know very well; but that affection he said to me was not that which he hoped to inspire in you later."

The burning red left the cheeks of the young woman, who became pale.

"And then," said she, with an effort.

"He spoke to me at some length of his father," Theodore answered, "of his tragic and mysterious death. The thought of that poorly explained tragedy, evidently haunted him, and it evidently had something to do with the act which terminated his life."

"Do you believe it?"

"I do not doubt it, the same sort of death. A shot in the left side. He must have yielded to the feeling."

Estelle suddenly took a step towards the fireplace.

"But my picture, Monsieur," said she, with a vehemence which Benoist had never known of her; "my torn, outraged picture, as though myself had been torn and insulted that same day? Is it possible that under that occult impulse M. de Beaurand destroyed it? Or was it a blind hatred, a stroke of insanity, jealousy"—

She stopped, that word which had escaped her lips provoked a new blush, which mounted to her forehead and immediately vanished. Benoist was troubled, as was she.

"A jealousy," continued the young woman, "and of what, great heavens! and of whom? I left the convent at eighteen; until then I had seen nobody except the friends of the family of de Polrey, the

friends of holidays, those whom a prudent mother chooses to invite to her house during the time when her daughters are there, those who have nothing in their natures to excite the imagination of little school girls. And in society, I have not met even one man capable of inspiring any interest in me, whatever. You know how they draw us girls to marriage? They do not allow us to see that the pretendants are chosen for us with vigilant hands. Raymond only, of all those whom I met, had serious qualities, capable of inspiring esteem and affection."

She hesitated for a moment, struggling, and suddenly allowed the avowal for which Benoist waited, to escape.

"Notwithstanding that, I did not love him; no, I had no love for him, it was rather pity."

She inclined her superb head with a sort of humility and continued immediately:

"Pity, because I vaguely felt that I could never love him as he hoped. It is true, Monsieur," added she, raising her eyes, and looking at Benoist, "I have never wept for him, for I did not love him."

What did she read in the eyes that drank in every word from her lips? Was it triumph, joy or prayer? She remained immobile, overcome by a delicious sensation which deprived her of all desire of speech. She was certain, however, that a door of destiny had just been opened, and that she could no more return after that day.

"Madame," said Benoist, slowly, "you have asked me to be entirely frank. I obeyed you. Permit me, in my turn, to ask a respectful question."

She did not refuse; he continued:

"You have told me, some time ago, that you were going to live in solitude under your maiden name. Is it because marriage inspires in you an inevitable repugnance?

She did not answer.

"Do you not think that a true union, based upon true affection, upon giving you a support, would allow you to be happy, and to be always good and kind?"

"Ah! Monsieur," said the young woman with the same energy which had surprised him but a short time before, "could I carry to a man the burden which crushes me? What man would accept it? And if he accepted it, would I not be a coward for imposing it upon him? Even the crowd insults me without knowing my name, you have seen that. And would I expose a man to participation in these insults, to be struck down perhaps by the chastisement? Ah, Monsieur, is it not enough that one man died for having married me?"

She turned her inflamed face and burst into tears, which were quickly staunched. "As long as the mystery is not cleared," said she, "I alone will bear the opprobrium, which I have not merited. You have spoken to me like a friend, for that and for the support which you afforded me, I thank you."

He bowed in silence. Both, without adding a word left the chamber and separated.

CHAPTER XXV.

Mme. Montclar had received a mortal blow; strong in her instincts and generous resolutions, feeble in the difficulties of a struggle which seemed without end, she had borne herself well in the aggression; but the resort which had artificially sustained her, had been broken by the last shock.

She maintained, during several days, her role of protectress, having Estelle write invitations, calling her friends to her, dressing herself, or allowing herself to be dressed, that she might again receive those whom she had invited, and bearing ostensibly toward her niece an affection and esteem, which she had never before borne toward any one.

This effort which wore out the last resources of her body and her mind, brought upon her a continued fever; the ardent and lively eyes hollowed and surrounded with black circles, she was only the shadow of the beautiful Madame Montclar. Estelle moved, even to tears, surrounded her with cares and filial caresses. Each feigned calmness and even gaiety in order to deceive the other, and, knowing well that she could not recover, still played the dolorous comedy of confidence.

One morning about eleven o'clock Madame de Beaurand preceding the waiting-maid, who bore upon a server, the breakfast of her mistress, found her aunt extended upon a reclining chair in a state of weakness and complete exhaustion. The eyes had no sparkle, the features no expression; the soft hands hung inertly by the side of her listless body.

"My dear aunt," said Estelle, kneeling, frightened, beside her, "do you see me, do you hear me?"

The invalid made a feeble gesture; the young woman arose and gave her a draught of cordial and then sent immediately for the physician, and afterward returned to her side. Madame Montclar being without strength enough to speak, breathed easily, her eyes were intelligent and kindly. Spontaneously, without knowing that which she did, Estelle ran to her writing-desk and wrote to Benoist four words: "Come to us immediately." Signed her name and sent the note to the address of the young man.

The doctor arrived first and gave but little hope; the life was exhausted, the lamp was extinguished, the death was not painful, but would return and vanish from moment to moment. When Estelle, who had called him, entered the room, Madame Montclar called her with her eyes.

"He told you that I am going to die?" said she, in a clearer voice, but feeble as a thread.

"Estelle, listen to me."

"I beg of you, do not fatigue yourself, my dear aunt," implored the young woman.

"Listen to me," said the dying woman, with a little impatience, "I have given to you all, all that I have. I can not give you friends, I have none. You will be alone. But I am sure of your being brave. You are a Beaurand, you. A true Beaurand, like me."

She had placed her right hand upon the head of her niece; the weight of that hand threw backward the beautiful face, imprinted with a proud resigna-

tion. The black eyes of Mme. Montclar looked into the black eyes of Estelle, veiled with tears and full of a compassionate tenderness. She seemed to scrutinize the soul of the young woman in that long look which only a conscience without stain could have borne.

"See how I was," said the dying woman, with a little wandering of the mind; "life has worn me out, worn me out. You are young, you will also struggle. A true Beaurand, yes—a true—"

All at once, her eyes were re-animated, she drew to her the face, which she examined so attentively, and looked at it yet a little closer; a strange, unquiet expression came over her features as a live rosy tint came to her cheeks. Twice she wished to express a thought which tormented her wearied mind, but she could not formulate the words; then her hand fell, her face paled, she sighed, closed her eyes and was motionless.

Estelle was afraid and leaned over her, then Mme. Montclar spoke slowly with her eyes closed.

"My husband, then my brother, then Raymond. I have lost all whom I loved. You have come and I go, poor child."

Another sigh deeper, sadder, shook her breast, then she seemed to become calmer and to sleep. Noiselessly the maid opened the door, the movement of her lips announced:

"Monsieur Benoist."

Estelle looked at her aunt and saw that she could leave her to the care of the maid, who took her place; she went out and received the young man in the neighboring room. He stood awaiting her,

disturbed. She looked at him and he understood that the note from Estelle came because of sorrow. More affected than she was, he held his hands to her. She put hers in his without ceasing to look into his sad, almost hopeless eyes.

"I have no longer anything," said that look, "I am an innocent waif, who goes to find herself upon the bank of an unknown river. Nothing remains, nothing remains."

All at once he read in the black eyes, one knows not what, that made him tremble from head to foot. Was it a call? He did not wait to reflect. The two hands which held those of the young woman, drew her forcibly to him and threw her upon his breast; he opened them and his arms closed upon the shoulders of Estelle with a gesture of protection. She did not resist; with bowed head, she tasted in herself, the grave and profound pleasure of feeling herself sustained. The simplicity of the gesture had deprived it of all that could make it resemble a caress. It was the close, and dignified embrace of strength protecting weakness.

He understood it thus for his arms immediately opened and he took a step backward, while his face had lost nothing of its almost austere expression. She stood still and looked at him, but with a submissive kindness which he had never before seen in those eyes and which had an indescribable charm.

"She is dying," said Estelle, without turning away.

She felt an intense, blinding joy upon knowing that he loved her.

"You will not be alone," said he, "I will come at any time you may ask for me."

"That can not be," replied she, suddenly made prudent and perspicuous by the intuition of his love.

She blushed upon pronouncing these words and his look troubling her, she lowered her eyes.

"What difference does it make," said he, with some impatience, "you can not be alone in such a time as this."

She had recovered her calmness, she put her hand forward slowly toward the arm of the young man, upon which she placed it.

"I am not afraid of being alone; I am not afraid to see death, but I shall fear a word——" She did not add the epithet; the word sufficed on the lips of a woman well bred.

"Have they not said a hundred times worse?" replied Theodore.

"Yes," said Estelle, quickly, "but it was not true."

She recoiled a step; her head lowered, as if afraid to have allowed such a word to have escaped.

Good breeding closes the lips of men and women under an invisible seal which stops the expression of all their sentiments, which interdicts the manifestations of all their emotions; under that invisible law, they could say nothing of that which entered their souls, they understood each other as well as though they had explained it by a long discourse; but it was to the true condition that falsehood and coquetry rendered them strangers.

"Is Mme. Montclar, then, surely lost?" said he without betraying the joy that he felt in his heart.

"It is but a question of hours."

"Then, give me your book of addresses; I will do, in my room, all that it is necessary to have done. Will you allow me to return to see you?"

"Without doubt. In the evening; if misfortune comes before, I will advise you of it."

"Thank you. The book of addresses?"

She went to her writing-desk, took out the book asked for and gave it to him.

"It will be necessary to inform M. de Mailly, our old relation," said she.

"You will write him, I will take charge of all the rest. You need not trouble yourself in the least." She heard him with a new feeling of complete satisfaction; she had believed that a blood more rich and more generous, like to the wines of the lands of the sun, ran in her veins at the sound of his voice which she was astonished to find so harmonious and so tender.

"Thank you," said she, putting in that word all that she could of thanks.

"Do not disturb yourself," said he, "whatever happens—whatever they do or say—you are the only mistress here, you should make yourself respected."

"For that I will answer to you," said she with a proud smile. "Why do you look at me like that," added she, struck with seeing an impression of odd trouble replace, upon the face of Theodore, that of confidence and kindness.

"I do not know," said he, passing his hand over his brow; "I am tired no doubt, for some time I have been ill, I believe it is nothing."

"Indeed," said she.

"Your eyes make me think of something and at the same moment when I thought of it, I lost the notion of that which I thought I saw. That is all, pardon me, have you confidence in me, tell me?"

"Yes," said she.

"Then this evening."

She returned to the room of Mme. Monclar under a singular impression of serenity and lightness. The sight of the old lady sleeping, so near to the end, far from inspiring in her sorrow, added still more to her surprising calmness; it was the arrival in port of a tired soul, the end of a dreary voyage, the repose after the battle of life.

An hour before Estelle envied her aunt for being so near death; she was almost jealous of the peace that awaited her; now she felt a new strength; life became dear in proportion to the struggle under which she found herself, her hands might be torn upon the thorns, the red blood might mark the path by staining the dust of the road; they now fought not only for honor but for another thing also, which without honor would be worthless, but which honor would raise to its proper dignity.

At the thought of that mysterious thing, Estelle felt her heart swell with modesty and joy; through her tears, humiliation, tortures of all kinds, he, the unknown visitor had come, the silent guest who knocks not at the door, but who comes as master of the house, widow without being a wife, strong in all the delicacy of the maiden, Mme. de Beaurand felt that she loved.

The dull anger that she had felt toward Raymond suddenly ceased, and was replaced by a profound pity, and without admitting it to herself, had she dared to look clearly, she would have found that she was thankful that he was dead, at least since she was at liberty now to marry Theodore Benoist.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Toward seven o'clock in the evening, at the moment when the rays of the sun ceased to tint the upper windows of the mansion, death came to Mme. Montclar with the twilight, and like it, softly and stealthily.

When Benoist came at nine o'clock, he found Estelle very calm, seated at her writing-desk writing letters.

The domestics were too well accustomed to the ways of the young man to be astonished to see him come under such circumstances; but thereafter it would be otherwise. Theodore gave to Mme. de Beaurand all the necessary information and instructions, that she might not have need of appealing to him so frequently.

They were both seated at the same table, facing each other; he taking the notes, she directing them or hunting the addresses. A grand sensation of calmness was in their hearts upon that warm evening of spring-time, under the tranquil calmness of the shaded light. A complete silence reigned in the hôtel which death had saddened for the second time in less than thirteen months. But, as the suicide of Raymond had brought trouble and confusion, the foreseen death of Mme. Montclar brought gravity and reflection.

That feeling of calmness, of silence, of repose, was so strong that Mme. de Beaurand felt the necessity of breaking it. Alone with him whom she loved, she

felt herself intimidated, as though she never had a confidential talk with him.

Leaving him with the cards, she opened the door of the neighboring room, where Mme. Montclar rested upon the bed, surrounded by candles and tapers. A sheet of pale light came through the open door into the tranquil salon. Benoist raised his eyes and saw nothing but the reflection. In that clearness, which, by contrast, seemed glaring, the form of Estelle, elegant and virginal in her dress of black, seemed sculptured from dark marble. He could not see her face, but the black, wavy, lustrous hair fastened at her neck, of which he could only see the outline, seemed very life-like.

At the end of the room she was looking at the dead, and to her she confided her thoughts. What would her protectrice have said had she known the truth? Would she have permitted Estelle to have forsaken her illusory fidelity? What would she have said had she known that her sole ambition was to marry Theodore Benoist, vintner; she a Beaurand?

"No, I am not a Beaurand," thought Estelle, the writing and the ceremony that for a moment made me the wife of Raymond did not make me a Beaurand. I am, notwithstanding all these sophisms, still Mlle. Brunaire, free to marry whomsoever I please. And that which I could not do during your life for fear of vexing you, my dear protectrice, I shall do now that you are dead, providing that I shall be able to wash away the bloody stain which your nephew placed upon my nuptial robe. I have nobody now to think for but myself, and in the

future all my time, all my strength shall be consecrated to seeking my own welfare.

Her young face had taken an expression of resolved firmness when she returned to the table where Theodore had remained.

"What were you thinking of?" said he naturally.

"Of the future," said she, in the same manner. "I have no peace in the present because I have not discovered the truth."

He thought immediately of the envelope and was ready to show it to her. But how should he tell the woman to what a degree he had doubted her, since so many words had been exchanged between them, and that they rested equally upon the same understanding? Even the gesture that had thrown Estelle upon his heart could be interpreted as an expression of fraternal sympathy.

Benoist had never trembled before anything; this time he literally shuddered upon thinking that one word would expose him to the loss of Estelle forever. He knew her to be proud; the wound which he might inflict upon her self-esteem might never be healed. He was afraid, upon thinking that she never said that she loved him, that, perhaps, she never would.

"I must be assured of her," said he to himself, before I expose myself to her indignation. "We are both to search," said he aloud, and we shall henceforth have a vast field of action.

Having finished his task he arose.

"I will return to-morrow," said he, "you will not go to the church, you should take no part in it, you will receive nobody."

"Can I do so?" asked Estelle.

"You are ill, and that is why—to-morrow."

They clasped hands, and she found she was alone, but not isolated.

The next twenty-four hours passed as pass days of that kind, at times quickly and then slowly. At last the ceremony took place. The funeral drew a large crowd of the curious and of old friends who repented at having allowed her so grievously to die in solitude, this woman for whom they had so much esteem and affection, there were also reporters there, in quest of news. All the people were evidently disappointed at not seeing Estelle. The sight of the young widow would have been a fine repast for the crowd and for the reporters; but then it had to pass, not without cruel words for the absent one, whose presence would inevitably have drawn others no less cruel.

Benoist, lost in the number, listened and recorded all with an unpitying precision. His generous nature was exasperated by the contemptibleness and the slanderousness, impersonal as it were, of the crowd, where each one added some perfidious word without thinking of the consequences, that they might, like the rest, have the appearance of being well informed, and perhaps to show some disposition. He became ferocious upon hearing these libels, and he, like the Roman Emperor, wished that he might see in that whole mass but one head that he might strike it down with one fell blow.

He preserved from the first to the last the load of slanders as he followed the procession, from the Rue de Lille, to the church of Saint-Thomas Aquinas, from Saint-Thomas Aquinas to Père-Lachaise, and

he amassed enough anger to last him for months, for years; profound anger that he had been one of them, that he like them, had judged lightly of her; his only superiority being that he had never opened his mouth to anyone, André Bolvin having vainly tried to draw from him a formal avowal of his suspicions.

A young officer was remarkable for the causticity of his remarks, he followed the convoy on foot, talking with his friends and making shockingly rude remarks about Mme. de Beaurand.

"I represent my family," said he to a corpulent man who followed painfully close upon the hearse ascending to the cemetery, and besides I am very willing to render to Mme. Montclar this slight testimony of my esteem; she was an excellent woman, worthy, and the particular friend of my mother-in-law; but Mme. de Beaurand, after all the shame that she has brought upon the name she bears, I hope will realize that she has compromised it enough; she has nothing more to do but disappear and hide in a hole."

Benoist could not resist the demon that had pursued him for two hours. Upon the pavement, made slippery by a spring shower, he made a mistep, throwing the young officer rudely.

"Attention there," said he, with a gesture of humor, continuing his way.

The convoy entered the cemetery. Benoist knew well that the moment was badly chosen. He waited until the inhumation was finished and when the crowd had dispersed, taking the arm of one of his friends whom he intuitively chose, he followed close upon the steps of the young officer. A short

distance from the gate, Theodore let his cane drop between the legs of his unknown enemy, in a way that made him almost fall.

"Awkwardness!" said the young man, with an unseemly epithet.

Their eyes crossed and the young officer understood that it was not the result of awkwardness.

"It was you who tripped me but a short time ago?" said he.

"Yes, Monsieur," said Benoist, returning the glare.

The officer but ill retained a not pleasant expression; the quarrel was entered upon; in less than half a minute notwithstanding the efforts of their friends, who did not understand it, the young men had exchanged cards.

"Hubert d'Aulmoye, Lieutenant of the 9th Chasseurs," said Benoist, reading it. "That will do him a great deal of good. That trifler is very young. They ought not to let him go alone on the streets."

"Theodore Benoist; what can be the matter with him?" said young d'Aulmoye at the same time.

"He is a brave officer, who has passed through his trials," said one of those who came up to him. "You have a bad affair upon your hands, my friend."

"But, then, what is the matter with him, the boor?" retorted the unconscious culprit, not without some seeming truth. "He trips me, and I say nothing to him; he put his cane between my legs—I demand that which he would have demanded of me. Truly it was not a matter of chance. I go to the interrement of a woman, whom I do not know; I do not know that I ever saw her three times in my life. My father-in-law is in the country. I am on

leave, and I have to get into an affair on account of that. It is a little hard; I don't understand it at all."

No one could enlighten him. After having lost themselves in conjecturing, they ended by selecting witnesses.

The friend who accompanied Benoist did not yet understand it. Such an affront on the part of a man always recognized as being sound-minded was absolutely inexplicable.

"Well," said Benoist, "to stop remonstrances, let us say that it is a military grudge; there are in the Army certain arms that are in more or less open rivalry. Suppose that I, an old dragoon, have a mortal dislike for the chasseurs. That will seem possible to you, will it not?"

"Benoist," said the other, suddenly enlightened, there is a woman at the bottom."

"A woman? What an idea! Do people fight in these days for women? I tell you that he displeases me, the fool. I assure you that is sufficient.

The seconds took a strange dislike to arranging the preliminaries of the duel, but Benoist was firm and d'Aulmoye hot-headed. The duel was arranged for the morning of the next day, with as moderate conditions as possible.

"Oh heavens!" said Theodore, philosophically, when he learned them. "I don't want to kill him, the little joker! I only want to whip him. But since our rules deny me that privilege, I will just bleed him a little. He will bear that better."

And being assured that it was only five o'clock, he determined to visit Mme. de Beaurand, to tell her of the ceremony.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The bells of Saint-Thomas Aquinas were still tolling the departure of the cortége, when Madame de Beaurand heard the rustling of a dress and little feet in the hall, which she well knew. She opened her door and received in her arms her little friend Odette.

"My dear," said she, almost choking her with kisses, "how is it you have succeeded in passing, notwithstanding my orders?"

"Oh, I said that you had forgotten that I was to come, that it was understood between us, and here I am. My poor, 'little mother' and you are an orphan once more."

That word, almost childlike, touched the heart of Estelle and brought tears to her eyes. They remained for a moment in each other's embrace, imbibing an indescribable sweetness from weeping together.

At the end of a moment Odette dried her eyes, and said:

"My husband follows the procession; mamma persuaded him, and he could not do otherwise. Papa's in the country, that's very bad. Hubert promised me that he would go to the cemetery, and I—I'm here. I could not stay away; I wanted to see you so much."

"Your husband is very good; it's very kind of him to do so," said Estelle.

All at once she realized that she had not received either a visit or a card from M. d'Aulmoye.

"Does he know that you are here?" added she with some vivacity.

The little head of Odette fell upon her dark cloth jacket.

"He knows it," said she, embarrassed without knowing it; "that is to say—don't look at me so, Estelle; you know that I never could fib when you looked in my eyes—no, he does not know it. But what difference does that make? Now, that I am married, I have a right to do what I please. I can not enumerate to him in detail all the stores into which he has taken me. Isn't that the same thing?"

Mme. de Beaurand followed to herself the line of her thought, while Odette, with a slightly feverish volubility, continued explaining to her how she had arranged her life, with a complete innocence, in a way to act to her humor, without openly deceiving her.

"My little girl," said she with a tranquil authority, when her young friend had stopped out of breath, "why have you not told your husband that you came to see me?"

"Because—because, listen, do you want to know the truth? He is mean. That is to say, he isn't the least bit mean in the world, but he has a bad tongue. O, Estelle, you can't imagine how they blackguard in the regiments. O, they told some things; some things that would make you shudder, and he believed all they told him; but that don't prove that he is mean; for example, to believe like that, the meanest things in the world; anyway, we have quarreled; it is our first quarrel. It made me awfully sad."

Upon her remembrance of this first quarrel, the

tears of the young wife flowed easy and free, like a May shower. Estelle smiled, absorbed in seeing her cry so easily.

"O, they said something bad of me?" said she, tranquilly.

"Something horrible. You know it as well as I do. He had no right to think so bad of people as that. It's villainous; I told him so. Then he mocked me; that made me mad. I told him that he was a coward to attack a woman who had no one to defend her. There, I was right, that is clear, isn't it? Then he got very mad. O, awful mad. You can't imagine it; and, as I scolded him, he said he didn't know that I had so much haughtiness. As for me, you know if I have any pride. Finally, he told me that he wouldn't permit me to see you. Frankly, Estelle, judge for yourself, if that was the time to tell him that I came here."

"Perhaps," said Madame de Beaurand, squeezing Odette's hand.

"No. You can speak of it in an easy tone; but if you had been in my place—in short, I didn't tell him; nor will I ever tell him, but I'll come and see you as often as I please."

Estelle kissed the little face tenderly; the young wife seemed like a child, it was impossible to treat her as a woman. Would it be possible to get into that little head the notion of a duty which nobody, it seemed, had taken pains to teach her?

"Listen, Odette," said she, with great tenderness, "you know that I love you. I'm going to tell you something. Of all the young women that I know, not one has given me a single mark of sympathy.

At present, now that Madame Montclar is dead, there is perhaps not a woman in the world who cares anything for me, except you only. You may then believe that your friendship is precious. Listen to me and understand. More than your friendship, a great deal more, your esteem moves me to the bottom of my heart. You, my poor child—you have an honest and kind heart; you do no think of useless wrong; you have to esteem the soul that you like. For that I thank you and I love you. But as for me, Odette, I shall not like you if you take upon yourself the habit of dissimulation to your husband's face.

"Dissimulation?" said Odette, surprised, almost shuddering.

"Yes, my dear child, that is the word. Your husband ought to know all your actions; you have not the right to hide one from him."

"Indeed, does he tell me all that he does? Does he tell me every place he has been? When I ask him he laughs."

"It isn't the same thing. You see, Odette, there is no reason why you should tell him all the minute details of your life, but you ought to live in such a way that, if he should ask you, you should never be afraid to tell him the truth."

Odette bowed her head in confusion; the moral atmosphere of her people had never let her hear such austere words, perhaps, she felt that Estelle was right.

"You should tell him that you came to see me," continued Mme. de Beaurand.

"I never will!" cried Odette, impetuously.

"You should tell him, though not immediately, if you don't want to, should he not speak of it. You should tell him, because if he should happen to learn it——"

"How should he learn it?"

"I do not know; perhaps by an indiscretion of the servants. If he should come to know it, it would be very humiliating for you, and then your life would be poisoned, for he would no longer have any confidence in you, and if that should happen, you see, my child, it would almost be better for you, young and charming as you are, to die that very instant."

She had closed her maternal arms over the shivering shoulders of her "*petite fille*," and held her smothered against her breast, while her eyes, staring vacantly, remembered the bitter time when the hard look of Benoist rested upon her like that of a judge.

"Confidence, Odette, is the first condition of happiness in marriage. One may be deceived, one may commit faults, but if each one is sure that the other never deceives, the human errors will be only the inevitable part of the cares which await us in this world. And they will love each other, notwithstanding the quarrels. You love him, your husband, do you not?"

"O, yes, when he isn't mean."

"He is not mean; he is young. He will correct himself, you see. There, you'll cry no more? Ah, well, some day when he is in a good humor tell him that you come to see me and that you did not intend to do wrong, and that you will come no more, Odette, never any more—at least, not until he brings you here himself."

"Then you don't want to see me any more?" said the young woman, starting with surprise.

"I deprive myself of my only joy," answered Estelle, squeezing the two hands persuasively, "but it is my duty, my child, the same as it is yours."

Odette looked into the eyes of her "*petite mère*," and read there so much resignation, so much sacrifice that her soul was stirred. A nobleness that she had never suspected revealed itself to her for the first time, causing in her respect which resembled fear. She submitted with no more resistance.

"You're going to detest my husband," said she, with some shame for having spoken ill of him.

"No," answered Estelle, with calmness, which made her kindness sweet and imposing. "I have not the least animosity for him. And now, my child, you had better go home, that he may not be angry at your absence. Go, but I love you ever so much. It is because I love you that I send you away."

"I can't see you any more?" said Odette, almost suffocated with tears.

"Perhaps; but what's the difference, since you know that I love you?"

"But I will write to you."

"No, you would then have to deceive in your letters. Nothing—that would be better."

The child passed her arm around the neck of her friend and sobbed.

"My friend, my 'little mother,' adieu."

"*Au revoir*, my dear."

She led Odette, who was choked with tears, to the great staircase, and watched her descend, so slight,

so delicate, so little a woman, so little prepared for the struggles of life. Their eyes met once again in a kindly look, and the door closed upon the last lady friend of Estelle.

Mme. de Beaurand returned to her room and seated herself, her hands clasped over her knees, thinking of a thousand sad things, of the death, of the renunciation of a long life devoid of happiness. But she was not sad, for there was to her an invisible star whose rays she felt.

A little after six o'clock, Benoist came. She was surprised to find him so restless, so occupied. He who was ordinarily grave and easy going. After he had told her in two words that nothing had troubled the obsequies, he in his turn questioned.

"Well, have you seen anybody?"

"The truth is I did receive one visitor," answered Estelle with a half smile. "I have yet one friend, notwithstanding all, a companion of my childhood Mlle. de Polrey. To-day Madame D'Aulmoye."

"D'Aulmoye," repeated Benoist, thinking that he had misunderstood.

"Madame Hubert D'Aulmoye. Her husband was a Lieutenant of the Eleventh Hussars, but he has been re-stationed and has come to Paris."

Benoist became very serious.

"You said that the wife of this Monsieur is your friend?" said he, without raising his eyes.

"I think so, the poor child, she has come twice in secret to see me. She has faith in me; but it is she only. I told her not to return—you understand? She has been married a few months, her husband is like the rest; he has no reason for liking me, as for

her—she is young, hardly eighteen; she commences life—she will have to be careful of herself, since she has the good luck to love her husband."

"She loves him?" asked Benoist.

"Yes, she loves him and he loves her; it was a marriage of love. Poor child, for the compassion she has borne me, for her chivalrous devotion, I wish that the day would come when I could return it to her. At present, I have rendered the only service in my power; I told her not to return. She still calls me her 'little mother' in remembrance of the convent; she touches me I assure you."

"Then you interest yourself very much in her?" insisted Benoist.

"As much as though she belonged to me, a daughter or a sister. Why?"

"O, I wanted to know. The number of those whom you love seem to be restricted enough to be seriously interesting."

"Is it not?" asked she with a half smile so seductive, so sympathetic, that Benoist lost his coolness.

"I think I shall go," said he, "I am fatigued. Will you give me your hand?"

She presented her beautiful open hand; he placed it in his own and she affectionately placed her left hand upon it.

"Good evening," said she, "and I thank you. For all that you have done for me, thanks."

He respectfully kissed one after the other, the two hands and went out, his mind greatly troubled.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Theodore was not content with himself; the very lively pleasure which he had found in provoking the young lieutenant annoyed him under the certitude that Mme. de Beaurand would be saddened to know that he had wounded the husband of her little friend. But then, how could he now prevent it? Had not a distressing concurrence of events made him address precisely the only man whom he could not hurt without regetting it. The affair was too far gone to stop it now and, besides at the remembrance of the words pronounced by the imprudent chasseur, Benoist felt his blood boil, his good sense told him repeatedly that he had been extremely imprudent, but his anger made him tremble with impatience.

The quarrel was so ridiculously incomprehensible that the public and the first witnesses sought for a more serious motive to explain it.

What difference did it make if the name of Estelle was pronounced? The young man had only said that which they themselves thought.

Another care harrassed him. Mme. de Beaurand ought not to know that he had fought for her. Would she not mistake him either for a fool or a brute for having provoked an unknown individual in that way?

"It was said," thought Benoist sadly, "that face to face with her I would settle myself in a way to commit nothing but folly."

The morning came, he dressed himself to go and

meet his adversary in a park which a friend had obligingly placed at their disposition. The morning was exquisite; one of those fine fogs, which announce beautiful days, floated over Paris, climbing the hill of Ville d'Avray, blurring the precise lines of the monuments, softening the colors of the masses of verdure and giving to the immense fields of stone, the softness of marine horizons.

"I can not slash that fellow" thought Benoist, "his little wife would hate me, would think horribly of me. And Mme. de Beaurand would not be pleased. I shall have to let myself be bled like a chicken. My only hope is that he will not be too awkward, for if he should be he might be capable of unintentionally running me through. Such a miserable adventure!"

He thought of his mother, who at that time was probably opening her eyes to the glad sun of spring-time; he could see her at the window looking over the wonderful valley extending at her feet, her eyes shaded with her hand, looking at the vines upon the hillside, unfolding their little, white, cottony leaves.

"My poor, dear mother," said he to himself, "if she only knew what a fool her son had shown himself to be, would she not be angry? And I would merit it. Let me, however, look to it that he does not care for me."

Young D'Aulmoye contrarily was burning with a most war-like disposition. Upon entering his house the evening before, much warmed by the preparations for his duel, he had not remarked, happily for her, the red eyes and the embarrassed manners of his wife.

Upon leaving Estelle, she was so much impressed with her duty that she would have made her confession immediately; she was prepared with a great effort of courage to admit her first and second visits, being well decided to make the grandeur of the soul of her friend apparent. She hoped to be able to make her husband know the magnanimity of her misknown character, and her little imagination could already see him crossing the threshold of the hôtel de Beaurand with her upon his arm, repenting and confused, ready to demand and to obtain her pardon.

The Lieutenant, who was naturally jolly, entered the house that day, however, with extreme ill-humor. After his first word she felt that he could not deceive his wife, whom he adored, and remarked that it was caused by grave pre-occupations in the service. Immediately after dinner, he shut himself in his room, with a roll of charts brought from the armory, and announced that he had some work to do for the minister, and that he would have to work all night as the charts had to be returned at six o'clock in the morning of the next day.

The seeming untruth of this statement did not shock Odette, she was too much troubled herself to not appreciate the happy chance afforded her to defer her avowal; she kissed her husband tenderly, hoping that he would not fatigue himself.

"After all," said she to him, "it is not as hard as to dance until 7 o'clock in the morning."

Perfectly reassured on his part, the young Lieutenant was not the less angry at the unknown man whose singular aggression brought him a disagreeable night under the shade of the emotions inseparable from a duel. He had fought two or three times

and did not take the affair tragically, but he took it seriously and that put him in a very disagreeable humor. It was upon inquiring, as he ought to about him with whom he was about to cross his steel, that he learned that not only was he a gentleman, but that he was also an old friend of Beaurand; that gave him some satisfaction, but it was not sufficient to quiet him. An unqualified aggression in a place as sacred as Père-Lachaise had provoked in him, without calming his anger, an eruption of phrases entirely of that class which modern language irreverently places under the designation of stereotyped. He presented himself upon the ground with the firm intention of giving a rude lesson to his adversary.

The sword was the weapon chosen and that permitted Benoist to hope for a pleasing success; he perceived immediately that d'Aulmoye had no intentions of sparing him. More disgusted with himself than he could have believed, he defended himself as best he could, trying not to wound his furious enemy, and that was not easy.

The young Lieutenant was not sufficiently master of himself to perceive the intentions of Theodore and that saved him from a cruel wound to his self-esteem; he was soon fatigued having fought too fast; at the end of a few moments he could not see clearly. A terrible thrust which would have pierced the breast of Benoist, through and through, passed between his arm and his body, only scratching the skin of his right wrist. D'Aulmoye was completely at the mercy of his adversary, who contented himself with throwing up his sword and stopping.

The duel was terminated before the Lieutenant,

dazed by the adventure, comprehended the situation. As he was neither a fool nor mean, he felt a real consideration for the man who, so furiously attacked, had courteously spared his life. They shook hands, the most cordially in the world, and each one went his way.

The scratch Benoist had received amounted to nothing; he however, had it slightly dressed, then waited for his carriage with his seconds; the almost unavoidable dinner was eluded by common accord, and soon he found himself at his own home, free to meditate at his leisure.

Hardly ten o'clock! Madame Benoist was going through her vineyard under the grand sun which could not but tan her fine skin; she went with slow steps, stopping here or there to look at the young buds and thinking, surely, of her son, for the excellent woman found opportunity to mix the thought of her son in all her occupations.

"Dear mother, continue to inspect the vines, your son sends you a tender remembrance. He is pleased with himself this morning; be also pleased without knowing why; that his deep delight surrounds you during all this day with an atmosphere of peace; this evening, upon retiring, when you think of him, say of him: 'My good Theodore,' for he merits it."

Theodore was satisfied. After a slight breakfast, he lay down upon the lounge and thought satisfiedly of the pleasure which the little Madame d'Aulmoye would experience; he imagined the arrival of the Lieutenant at his home; very sure that he would be unable to keep himself still and the young wife would soon learn of the happening. The chasseur

was an honest fellow and Benoist knew he would do him justice.

That thought made him very comfortable and he tried to draw enough consolation from it to compensate for his being unable to go to see Estelle that day, or upon the day following. When should he be able to see her?

She was going to Saumeray, the next day, perhaps, and without forbidding him, she had not asked him to come and see her. Besides, was it not, in fact, impossible? What excuse could he have for presenting himself at her home, so far from Paris?

Then, was he to pass weeks, perhaps months, without seeing her, without speaking to her, without writing to her?

At that idea, Benoist bounded from the sofa and found himself standing before his writing-desk. He was going to ask permission of her to see her once again, and then he would oblige her to send him an answer. After all, was it not absurd that that woman, so good, so beautiful, so worthy of all regard, was condemned to isolation by the conventionality of a world which put her outside its laws?

His enthusiasm suddenly fell, the words of his brother came to his mind.

"I would accept her as a daughter with pleasure," the old lady had said, "provided that you may be able to prove that she has been merely calumnied."

"Prove," and by what means?

A sort of rage seized the young man at the idea that Estelle for more than a year had been struggling in that net. Until then, absorbed by his own sentiments, he had not thought of those which the

poor woman might experience; a sudden intuition disclosed to him a long martyrdom which she had patiently endured, the wounds which she had borne, the anguish which had torn her.

"And she found means to think of others," cried he, in a loud voice, in the excess of his emotion. "And she is good. She excuses, she pardons. Ah, chère, ah sainte! And what a wretch I am compared with her."

He opened the secret drawer of his writing desk and took the portfolio in which he kept the most important papers. In a separate pocket lay the envelope, he placed it before him, he examined it with a sort of fear.

Why had he kept it so long? What if it were only a scrap of useless paper, and if so, why should he care for it? While he looked at it, or merely thought of it, a procession of bloody pictures rose before him, breaking his repose. Possibly, it was the true key to the mystery; in that case Mme. de Beaurand should possess it.

He would send it immediately to Estelle, that same day, and if she could find in it no clue they would destroy it together, and thus cease to think of it. Now he was sure, very sure, that she would pardon all doubts, all suspicions, all that had on account of him, saddened her existence. And, even before having confessed his fault, he felt that she had already pardoned him.

He awaited the evening feverishly, and about nine o'clock he went to the hôtel de Beaurand.

CHAPTER XXIX.

At the name of Benoist, Estelle ordinarily so reserved, gave forth an exclamation of joy and arose quickly. The door was closed, they were alone, she took two steps toward him and then stopped, her hands clasped before her.

"Ah," she said in a deep voice, "I am pleased to see you. I was going to write you. You are good, you are generous. Yes, you are good."

He remained standing silently, fascinated; she came to him and touched with her delicate hand the little band of linen which bound the wrist of the young man, passing slightly beyond his glove.

"You have allowed yourself to be wounded," said she, "for me. For me first, and then because I love Odette. O, say nothing, I understand it all. I divined it."

"But who told you?" Benoist commenced.

She pointed to a large evening paper, spread upon the table.

"There, in the latest news. Tell the truth, is it for me that you fought? The poor fellow said some unkind words."

Not knowing what to answer, Theodore kept silent without removing his eyes from the beautiful face, animated with a passionate expression, more beautiful than he had ever seen it before.

"Does he know that it was for me?" continued Estelle.

"No," said he, briefly; "I don't think he does."

"And you were the better. You could have killed him. I read between the lines, that is enough. They speak of your courteousness."

Benoist seized the paper and read the lines of the latest news.

"It is one of his friends," said he, "or himself, who wrote that. The fool."

"It is well done, I am pleased with it."

Estelle's eyes burned with an extraordinary flame; her half-opened lips smiled, agitated by an imperceptible trembling. Benoist seized her hands.

"And I," said he, "I am happy. Yes, I wanted to fight with that ninny, because he spoke ill of you, like the big baby that he is; yes, I defeated him in order that his wife might not weep, not shed a tear. She whom you love and who loves you. Yes, I received a scratch which doesn't amount to as much as they say; all that is true. But I did all that because I love you, you understand, I love you, and I want you to be my wife; we should see then if any one dare attack you. Tell me, Mme. de Beaurand, would you be simply Mme. Benoist?"

"Yes," said she, looking at him with a perfect, an absolute confidence.

He pressed closer the hand which he held, remained motionless, saying nothing; they looked, transported, into each other's eyes, and they were conscious of nothing else than their own happiness. Suddenly Estelle disengaged herself.

"Yes," she repeated, "but not till the light has come. Otherwise, never. I would enter your house without stain."

He took from his pocket the envelope and placed it before her upon the table.

"What is that?" she asked, astonished.

"It is the envelope that contained the letter, you know."

She looked from the envelope at Benoist, and from him at the envelope, not understanding.

"The letter has disappeared, the envelope remains. Look at it well, study it; the happiness of our life is perhaps in that. Try."

She trembled, seized by a strange emotion; he brought a chair and seated himself close to her, within the circle of light thrown by the reflector of the lamp.

"Be not afraid," said he to her, seeing that she was affected; "you have been so brave until now."

"It was because until now I was fighting for myself alone. Now I am afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of not succeeding in the search. I am afraid to look at that paper. What if I should see nothing in it?"

"Well, we should search elsewhere. Have courage; look! See in the corner the post-mark of Laval. Does that say nothing to you?"

She shook her head negatively.

"Then examine the writing. Take it easily, don't agitate yourself, be calm."

She leaned over the paper and looked at it attentively.

"You do not recognize the writing?"

After a silence she repeated the same discouraged gesture.

"You have never had in your service any domestic, or any woman who would wish you ill? It is

the hand-writing of a domestic or of a countryman, a servant perhaps."

Estelle took the envelope in both hands with a kind of timidity and brought it closer to her.

"A servant?" ransacking her memory—"No. At Mme. de Polrey's I had a maid who could neither read nor write."

"That is not a reason, and before that?"

"Before that I was in the convent."

She remained silent, reviewing the course of the years gone by. All at once she trembled from head to foot. He looked at her without daring to question her; she remained undecided for a moment, then she rose and ran to her writing-desk.

She dug to the bottom of the drawer which held the old relics of her childhood, and returned with a *petit paroissien* of red morocco, worn bare at the corners. The interior was filled with yellow, half-destroyed pictures of sanctity; the lace paper which surrounded them fell into dust as she turned the leaves of the book; she stopped over a picture ornamented with a silver wafer, and removed it.

The picture represented a kneeling saint, clothed in a monastic costume, with her eyes raised toward heaven; below, printed in small capitals, was "*Sainte Rosalie.*" Behind the deformed and uncertain writing were traced the following words. "*A sa petite Estelle Brunaire, Rosalie Ferel.*" (To little Estelle Brunaire, Rosalie Ferel.)

"Rosalie," said the young woman, who had recovered her calmness. "It was Rosalie. I would have hesitated to believe it."

An expression of bitterness passed over the beautiful, thoughtful face.

"Rosalie?" asked Benoist.

"The waiting-maid of my mother. I am sure, absolutely sure, it is her writing; besides, doubt is not possible, look at the odd form of the *B*. I have never seen anybody else who made a *B* in that way."

Truly, the similarity of the *B* of Beaurand and that of Brunaire was absolute; nobody else would have been able to make such extraordinary flourishes as those which formed that consonant; it was the work of an inexperienced person who repeated thus, in this way, the form of calligraphy which had been taught her in her childhood.

"Rosalie, lives then, at Laval?" asked Benoist, his heart crushed and his respiration short.

"Laval? No, she was at Vitré, in Brittany."

"Where is Vitré?"

"Very near Laval. She could have given a letter to some one to post there; I understand now; but why should she have written?"

She remained perplexed, her head upon her hands, plunged in meditation.

"She never loved me," said she, at last, "she never loved me. However, she was an honest girl, incapable of slander or cowardice; I think so, at least. It seems frightful and a little foolish. But I was so little."

"Do you believe that she would have calumnied you to such an extent as to cause this misfortune?"

Estelle reflected an instant.

"No," said she, "she would not have calumnied me, she was strangely afraid of Hell; she feared sin more than death. She would not, voluntarily, have committed such a sin."

All at once; the young woman remembered the strange apparition at Coutance.

"It was she, I am sure now, it was she, and she recognized me. She had upon her face an expression which I shall never forget, an expression of the damned, who implore——"

In a few words she told Benoist of her visit to the cathedral, and the impression she had received from that country-woman clothed in mourning, so singularly struck at sight of her, so mysteriously, quickly disappeared.

"My friend," said she, in closing, "it is Rosalie who wrote that letter. We must find Rosalie. Whether she has calumnied me or not, it is she who is the cause of the death of M. de Beaurand."

She was silent.

Who of us, struck by a catastrophe, would not turn with infinite pleasure to discovering the cause of the misfortune which it had heaped upon us? Estelle trembled, in thinking that the death of Raymond had brought so many sorrows into her life; would her misfortune to-day become more aggravated, or would the future become clear for her, even become splendid under a happy and grand love?

"Since it is thus," said Benoist, who had followed upon the serious face of the young woman her thoughts, which were now so clear, "and since it has appeared to be so dark, and we ought to learn it, we shall have to find Rosalie, at any price, and make her confess."

"Would she speak?" asked Estelle; "she is a strange girl. It might be that she would refuse

absolutely to tell me that which she has confided to the dead."

"In that case, one would find means to intimidate her," said Benoist, thinking of André Bolvin. It is averred that a letter written by her was the cause of the death of M. de Beaurand; if she refuses to inform us of it of her own free will, we shall have recourse to justice."

"Justice?" repeated Estelle. "The noise would awaken around that tomb a scandal, my name and my person would again be raised to public curiosity. Ah, my friend, have I not already suffered enough? Spare me, I pray you, this new bitterness."

"However," insisted Benoist, "in order to wash away all calumny, a certain publicity is necessary."

"We shall see, we shall see. While waiting, I beg of you guard the secret of our success. We will work alone, and if anything horrible be revealed—let us be, if possible, alone in the knowledge of it. If you only knew how much I am afraid of all things at present! I hope for but one thing, and that is that I shall be no more in their minds."

"That will not be difficult," said the young man, smiling, "but we shall see later. Then, you are going to Vitré?"

"You will come with me," answered she, without the least embarrassment. "I can not undertake such a venture alone, and who will aid me, if not you? We shall leave to-morrow morning."

"You desire it? Have you foreseen the consequences?"

Estelle indicated with a sign of her hand that she had thought it all over.

"Then you will go alone; I will go this evening in an hour. You will find me at Vitré to-morrow afternoon; I will meet you at the station."

She looked at him regretfully; certainly she would have preferred not being separated from him, she was so strong and assured in his presence. But she felt that he was right.

"To-morrow," said she, taking his hand.

"Bring the picture and the envelope," the young man advised as he left.

She did not close her eyes for a minute during that long night. The morning of the next day, under pretext of going to Saumeray, she was taken to the railway, and at three o'clock, upon the platform of the station of Vitré, she perceived Theodore, who awaited her.

CHAPTER XXX.

Independent of the particular emotion which agitated her, it was a strange and new feeling for Estelle to find herself alone with a man, far from Paris, far from all with which she was familiar. Her first emotion was, however, one of pleasure. While in the car, since morning, she had felt so heavily the weight of solitude that the sight of her friend gave her extreme pleasure.

He took her immediately to the little hotel, old and odd, but of a scrupulous cleanliness, situated opposite the station, and they went to the second floor by an obscure stairway. She entered the clear and joyous room, into which he followed her.

"I beg your pardon," said he to her, "for not being able to offer you a salon. There are none in Vitré where I could receive you."

She smiled without embarrassment; the beautiful room of the inn, with its *armoire à glace* and its round table of mahogany, did not seem to her in the least to resemble a bed-chamber; the bed itself, high and massive, was draped with blue India calico, with flowered designs which brought to her immediately an idea of a monument such as she had never before known.

She seated herself in the only arm chair in the room, and he drew a straw chair in front of her, on the other side of the table.

"Arriving this morning at a very early hour," said he, "I have already spoken to the authorities, and I fear that Rosalie is not at Vitré."

The animation in the features of Estelle disappeared, and was replaced by a pallor which scared Benoist.

"But we shall be able, at least, to get track of her," he hastened to add. "She has lived here, they told me; but I have not had enough time to find out when she left, if so much as that she is not here."

"It is something to be certain of that," said Estelle, recovering courage.

"Well, if you wish, we will go to a house which they have pointed out to me, where there is a woman who knows her, and who is even a relation of her, I believe."

"Immediately," answered the young woman, rising.

They went together down the hilly streets of the little, aged town, which was so pretty with its antique houses under the porches upon the side of the street. At the windows early geraniums, rose bushes laden with flowers, served as curtains to guarantee against curiosity the women who were seated with their work in their hands, as one sees them in the old Dutch pictures.

Estelle looked to the right and to the left into the houses, trying to find the features of Rosalie, who, during the night which she had passed without sleep, had been urged upon her memory with a surprising distinctness. From time to time a face attracted her attention, causing her to stop quickly; the placid face of a Bretonne would then turn toward her, questioning with curiosity the face and the costume of the pretty Parisienne, who would pass, bowing her head slightly, as though intimidated.

Thus they arrived at the church of Notre Dame, with its elegant exterior pulpit, then they turned the corner and entered a narrow court, with a moss-covered pavement. Theodore opened a door and Estelle found herself in a large and high hall, superb remains of the Renaissance.

The rosy flesh of newly killed pigs hung near the window, looking delicious; under the mantel of the fireplace, which was as elegantly carved as a jewel of a goldsmith, but the delicate details of which were covered by numerous coats of dirt and smoke, an old lady was seated upon a stool, trying to warm her bony and wrinkled hands with the imaginary heat of some chilled coals. Upon seeing this man of stately height and that elegant woman cross the threshold, she fixed upon them eyes that were almost blinded and of a pale green color. Estelle thought of the Fates who held in their hands the destiny of mankind.

"Pardon me, Madame," said she, understanding that her voice would be less disqueting to the old woman than that of her companion, "are you not related to Rosalie Ferel?"

The old woman moved her weak eyes from one to the other, and at last rested them upon Estelle, but did not answer. A pork-dealer, a large man, came from the next room and answered the question.

"Rosalie was the waiting-maid at my mother's house," said Estelle, not without slight embarrassment; habituated to act in all frankness, she suffered upon trying to hide a part of the truth. "I would like to see her; I have something to say to her."

"Rosalie was waiting-maid with Mme. Brunaire,"

said the old woman, immediately, who seemed not to have understood or heard. "Mme. Brunaire," she repeated, with emphasis.

"She was my mother," replied Mme. de Beaurand, softly; "she has been dead——"

"O! a long time," said the good woman, decisively, without removing her eyes. "It isn't for her that you are wearing mourning?"

"It is for my aunt," said Estelle, who did not dare to look at Benoist. She felt that, accompanied by a man, it would be impossible for her to declare herself a widow.

Happily the old Fate did not disturb herself about that, taking them for husband and wife.

"You are the little Brunaire," said she, still motionless. "But then what do you want of Rosalie?"

"Say it is to give her some money," murmured Benoist, in English in the ear of his companion.

She threw a look of distress at him; he understood that she could not forge a story and maintain it.

"Madame," said he, "is of age and in possession of her fortune. She would like to do something for the old waiting-maid of her mother."

"Ah," said the old woman, whose eyes left Estelle and fixed themselves upon the young man.

"And for that," he continued, "we would like to know where Rosalie lives. Did she not live in Vitrê?"

"Yes," answered the large man, "but it is five years since she went away."

Estelle and Benoist exchanged a look.

"Has she gone to Laval," asked the young woman, quickly.

The man threw a look of astonishment at her.

"Laval; no, why? I don't believe that during her life, she ever put her foot in Laval."

Estelle felt her heart fail her. Theodore went to her and slightly grazed her dress to make her understand that he was there and that she should not lose courage.

"But you go there, do you not?" said she to the man, smiling.

The pork-dealer laughed aloud.

"I," said he, "I go there to buy my hogs when there is a fair. Yes, surely, I go there."

"There was a fair there but a short time ago. Did these pigs come from Laval?"

"No, Monsieur, I bought these here," said the man, flattered to find a Parisian interested in his business. "I sold those from Laval last week. The fair is held upon the first Monday of the month."

The light came quickly to Estelle's eyes, she was married upon Tuesday, and then the letter must have been put into the post at Laval, upon Monday, by the pork-dealer.

"Did she remain here long last year," asked she, entering into the spirit of the examination.

"Indeed, no," replied the large man, willingly, "she came upon the last day of April to stay a little while, and then I do not know where she went, she went away at the end of a week just as I returned from the fair."

"You put her letter in the post?" said Benoist, affected, notwithstanding himself. "You have not forgotten?"

"Surely I have not forgotten."

"Do you know to whom it was addressed?" continued the young man, whose throat was dry from emotion.

"Well—no, Monsieur, since I can neither read nor write."

Benoist took a long breath.

In order to shelter herself from the eyes of the old lady, Estelle went to the mantel-piece, which she feigned to examine with much attention.

"It is a beautiful mantel," said the pork-dealer, "and a great many people come to see it."

Estelle, in order to recover herself, followed with her fingers, the elegant sinuosities of a stone arabesque; her heart beat so loud for a few moments that she was afraid that she would be unable to hear anything.

"Rosalie was born in this house, was she not?" asked Benoist.

"No Monsieur, it was not here, since her mother came here when she was still very young."

"Where did she come from?"

"From Mont-Saint-Michel, Monsieur."

"I thought she was always going to live here," said Estelle, almost shivering.

"She returned after the death of her mistress, but she is worried. I do not know about what and she went away.

"Where?" asked Benoist, who believed that the visible emotion of his companion would inspire suspicion in the old woman.

"For many places, Monsieur, if Madame will remember, she was an odd girl, with an extraordinary

character. She had an idea of making pilgrimages and I imagine that she has gone to visit several of the churches."

"But now, where do you think she could be found? We would like to give her that which belongs to her without waiting for her."

"This is no affair of mine," said the pork-dealer, with embarrassment. "Say, mother, do you know?"

The Fate extended her arms toward Estelle, who leaned against the mantel-piece, almost fainting.

"Then it is true that you are the little Brunaire?" said she, fixing upon the young woman her dead eyes, full of the deep suspicion of a country woman.

"It is true?" said Estelle, with the accent of one who is sincere.

"Swear to it," insisted the old woman, in a sharp tone "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

"I swear," said Estelle, repeating the formula.

The Fate made a sign and fixed upon her a look which pierced her like an arrow, a look which seemed fantastic in her dull eyes.

"Show her the picture," said Benoist softly.

The young woman sought in the little morocco sack, from which she had not been separated, since the evening before, and drew from it the missal. She opened it and gave to the good woman, the picture of Saint Rosalie, saying:

"She wrote my name here, herself."

The old woman and her son examined the picture with evident respect, turning it over and over in their awkward but kindly hands. At last the pork-dealer gave it to Estelle.

"We cannot read," said he, "but very surely it is Rosalie, since you say so. That is enough."

The old woman was mollified.

"If it was only to trouble Rosalie, you see," said she, "I would not let you know where she is. She is a little feeble-minded, but she is not bad. Rosalie ought to be at Mont-Saint-Michel, in the old house of her grandmother, which she inherited a short time ago. You might write to her. It is immediately in front of the parish church. Saint-Michel is a long ways from here."

Benoist took the liberty of taking Estelle's arm and passing it through his own, for he was afraid she would fall.

"We thank you very much, Madame and Monsieur," said he. "We hope you will excuse us and we wish you both good afternoon."

The pork-dealer, slightly astonished at seeing the conversation terminated so abruptly, conducted them to the street and followed them with his eyes to the first corner.

When they were out of sight, Theodore looked at Estelle, who allowed herself to be led like a child.

"You are trembling violently," said he to her, with an extreme kindness, "but we must go on for they are looking at us."

She went silently to the hotel, which happily was not far distant, and there in the blue room she let herself fall into the arm chair, completely exhausted.

"You have need of rest," said he, making a movement to leave her.

She looked at him with supreme energy.

"We will leave for Mont-Saint-Michel," said she,

"at this same instant, if there is a train, that they may not have time to warn Rosalia so she may escape. I am sure now that she has done something horrible, and I can not sleep until I have found it out."

"So be it," said Benoist, simply, as he went out to prepare for their departure.

CHAPTER XXXI.

In the twilight the train carried Estelle and her friend alone in their apartment of the first class; alone, really alone for the first time, since they knew of their reciprocated love.

They were seated *vis-à-vis;* the young woman leaned her head back against the cushions trying to sleep; at the end of a few moments she opened her eyes and met the eyes of Theodore fixed upon her with a tenderness which touched her heart.

She tried to speak to him but the sound of the moving train hindered his hearing; moving, he seated himself near her and both silently looked from the open window upon the Breton landscape and upon the woods and the sheep covered landes, feebly lighted by a narrow ray from the moon which glanced before them.

The air had the softness and the penetrating charm of spring; the furz and genista in flower shone like great masses on pale gold in the dim light; the little hidden banks under the weeping willows gave forth a delicate fog lightly floating over the bare branches; the earth seemed bashfully happy, like a young bride still enveloped in her nuptial veil.

Estelle felt even the same. Her soul came out from a dark winter, since now, she was loved, she loved, nobody could divest her of that with which she was blessed.

Rocked by the movement of the train, she felt

herself carried toward a goal which was not Mont-Saint-Michel, but which was love; and of that she had no fear. Her marriage might be many months distant, of that she cared not, because she felt herself cherished and protected, notwithstanding. The troubles of the past had given place to a serenity which the nearness of a possible frightful discovery could not darken.

Benoist confusedly divined her thoughts and dared not trouble them. He felt they were so high and holy. From time to time they exchanged a look with a sort of half smile and fell back into their reveries. At a station where the train stopped for a few minutes, a breath of fresh air entered the car, making Estelle's hair wave and the intoxicating song of a nightingale lost itself in space like the appeal of a loving soul.

Estelle straightened up, sighed and looked out from the train. The car started slowly, some affecting notes still came to her ears, then she could hear nothing but the regular, rolling *saccadé* of the car over the rails. She looked at Benoist, quickly, Benoist held his hands to her and she gave hers to him with trouble mixed with felicity.

"You will be mine Estelle?" said he lowly, but she heard it, however. "I have suffered much for you, more than you have suffered for me, for I hated you, and you were too good to hate. I hated you, I believe, from the day of your marriage. . . While Raymond was speaking to me of you, that day I felt a sort of envy, believing him blinded by his love. At the moment, doing violence to my real sentiment, I said to myself, it would be terrible if these two

charming souls should not be happy with each other, but soon a bad thought came to me: I did not think that you would be happy. When I saw Raymond dead, lying prone, I hardly dare tell you. I do not know, but my sadness was mixed with a sort of relief——. Yes, Estelle, I had thought, not at that moment, but a few minutes after, that you never were his; and I am persuaded that it was an instinctive aversion which guided me. I wished ill to you, I had in myself voluntarily calumnied you——. You smile instead of casting me off, you understand that in hating you, I loved you?"

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling with tears, and outside the Breton landscape continued to roll by—without too much haste, for the little lines were not distinctly drawn: the heavens were soft and clear, of a light gray peculiar to countries near the sea. He continued:

"To love you, that idea could not come to me. It was pure folly. I affirm to you that I never thought of it, but as I hated you, it was necessary to explain why the thought of you never left me for one minute. I persuaded myself that my affection for Raymond made it my duty to follow you; I found a mean delight in it—a wicked pleasure which you cannot imagine."

She listened to him, half smiling, with a depth of confidence impossible to describe; that, since he loved her, he should thus show her his naked soul.

"Do you know how I came to know I loved you?" continued he. "It was my mother who told me. You will love my mother, Estelle; you never had a better friend. Since the day I told her of my

suspicion, she has not ceased to defend you. That envelope—how many regrets, how much remorse it has brought me—she said that I should give it to you, immediately. If I had listened to her, I might possibly have spared you many sorrows; but I felt vaguely that if I should give it to you I should then have no pretext for following you, for thinking of you all the time. I was blind, I was deaf, I was a fool, I hated you and I adored you, Estelle."

"My friend," said she allowing him to raise to his lips the hands which she had placed in his.

She withdrew them softly, the lamp in the car had just gone out and the half obscurity revealed the modesty of the young woman; he followed her eyes to the west where there still remained pale reflection in the sky.

"The day which will break to-morrow," said he, "may bring you care for all your life; it may mix you in a fault, in a crime; you may never find yourself such as you are at this moment: it will leave upon you an ineffacable stamp. Before that time I wish to say to you as I will repeat to you hereafter, whatever comes, I love you, I have confidence and you shall be my wife."

"Ah," cried Estelle, suddenly overcome with anguish, "why did Raymond abandon me; what could have been his sorrow, crime or shame? He ought to have lived to protect me, to defend me. Dead, as he is, I can not pardon him, leaving upon me the responsibility of his act, he has deserted his colors. I know what you were going to say. Do not say it will release that man from his crime toward me, who married him without love and only that he might be happy."

"He is dead," said Benoist, softly.

She inclined her head upon her breast, closed her eyes and remained silent. He understood that she was praying.

The train slackened its speed; a more lively air bore to them the perfume of the sea; outside the heavens were studded with stars. Estelle opened her eyes.

"My dear," said he to her, "what can be our future destiny? The day which is ended has bound us together indissolubly; from this hour before God and before our consciences, we are married."

"Then so be it," said she gravely.

The train stopped, they descended upon the platform, deserted at that late hour; notwithstanding the efforts of the hotel keepers to keep him, Benoist engaged a driver, half asleep, and a rickety carriole. A quarter of an hour afterward, they were rolling over the sand toward Mont-Saint-Michel. Resting against each other, in a calm happiness which destroyed all apprehensions, they went in the night, the clear night of the last days of May, balmy and pure as the respiration of a new born child; a soft zephyr whispered and sighed through the old fences of the fields disputed by the sea; the tufts of heather and of tamarind, grew here and there in the desert pastures. This landscape, saddened in the day time, took under the clearness of the numberless stars a soft, yet powerful charm.

The milky-way extended toward the southeast like a luminous cataract falling from the heavens into a bottomless gulf behind the earth: it seemed so near that one could almost catch it in the hand; but

the profound azure seemed deep between the constellations. All at once, upon her left Estelle saw the mast and cordage of a boat drawn in black.

"We are very near," said Benoist to her in a low voice.

Since leaving Pontorson, they had not exchanged a word. Their driver quickened the pace of his little horse with his voice and his whip. They turned an angle and space opened before them.

"Look," said Benoist.

The silhouette of Mont-Saint-Michel was drawn against the sky with a powerful distinctness, notwithstanding the night. It was a time of the high tide, of tranquil waters, without a ripple, flooding the old sea walls and reflecting the stars of silver from the zenith in gold upon the darker sea. The shoes of the horse clicked upon the stones of the road and almost before they had time to know it, the massive portal of the fortress opened before them.

Notwithstanding the advanced hour, they found a lodging house; a quarter of an hour afterward they were in a house situated near the fortress; upon separating for the night, they silently pressed each others hands.

Estelle opened her window and looked out. The land formed a black band at some distance; one could see toward the north a line of little hills; nearer, the sea, scintilated with stars.

At the end of a minute or two, the young woman perceived that the tide was running out very fast. One after another the stars disappeared, replaced by a gray, dull beach; here and there a little pond still retained the reflection of a star; but it would sud-

denly vanish. A soft sound, like a smothered sigh, announced the movement of the mysterious water.

Above the head of Estelle, the hushed voice of her friend could be heard; his room was in the upper story.

"The sea-stars are going out," said he, in a low voice, in the great silence of that memorable night; "one after the other, like tired travelers who wish to sleep. Thus your sorrows, thus your troubles. And above, the real stars remain in their impassive serenite, like immortal love. Sleep Estelle, without fear."

"Thanks," said she, in a voice almost like a sigh.

She closed her window and slept a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The bells awakened Estelle, who ran to the window. The gladness of the daylight laughed outside; the birds sang in the trees; the gardens upon the edge of the ramparts cast their perfume upon the air; the sea-gulls careened around the old hill with triumphal cries. She dressed very quickly.

The servant came up to her room with a server, upon which were coffee and milk, which she placed in a neighboring unoccupied room, of which the young woman might make a salon.

"I will tell Monsieur, your brother, that he may descend for breakfast."

Estelle smiled, surely, Benoist not being her husband, must be her brother. That thought, which rendered homage to her purity, had the effect of a delicate compliment offered her by innocent hands.

Benoist descended; he also had slept well, and his mind possessed all the clearness, all the resolution necessary to carry on the hazardous work which he was about to undertake. In a few words he explained his plan of campaign.

"Let me have the envelope," said he; "if Rosalie is not disposed to admit it, I shall be better able to frighten her than you. If there should be any distressing thing in it, I may then soften the bitterness. At least, if you would not——"

"I would not have a secret in which you could not participate," said Estelle, firmly. "Act as seems best to you, I will await you here."

He went out. At that morning hour, the old, low houses which lined the single Rue du Mont, had almost all upon their thresholds two or three white-headed children, chubby and dirty faced, who ate with gusto, the long berry-covered pieces of bread, and looked upon the gentleman with satisfaction. Near the little parish church he stopped in indecision; only one house, similar to the others, had no children upon the steps, neither at the windows, closed from eave to foundation; it seemed uninhabited.

"Rosalie Ferel?" asked he of a neighbor who was throwing grain to some chickens.

"It is there," said she, pointing to the darkened house; "but she is at mass, which will very soon be over."

He thanked her and waited, in the midst of the general indifference of a population, surfeited with the pleasure of seeing strangers. At the end of ten minutes, the women commenced to come from the church, singly; Benoist looked at them with attention, sure, from the description, he would know Rosalie.

She appeared with her head covered with a black mantle, whose folds fell straight upon her drugget skirt. The old waiting-maid had taken upon herself, the costume of the country-women with their slightly crude manners. She was meagre and very pale, more so than Benoist had expected.

"There is a gentleman there, who wished to see you, Rosalie," said the officious neighbor.

She stopped short, and looked at the man who saluted her; a slight color mounted to her lips and flashed over her forehead; only her eyes retained

their cold gray and the expression of an animal that knows it is trapped.

"You wish to speak to me?" said she, in a voice full of anxiety.

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

She cast a look around her as if she wished to escape; then, with a gesture of hopeless resignation, she took her key from her pocket, and without letting her eyes rest on Benoist, she said to him: "Come."

They entered the little house, simple, cold and poor, but of rigorous cleanliness. She closed the door and said to him: "Be seated."

They were in a narrow, low room, lighted by a window with two little greenish panes; a table, four chairs and a large bureau composed all the furniture; through an open door, one could see in the next room, larger and better furnished, a curtained bed covered with violet India calico. Rosalie went into that room and returned immediately.

She had taken off her mantle. Her angular face was shaded under a simple bonnet of white muslin. She wore over her dress of black drugget, a violet cotonnade apron of deep color, a fichue of the same color, black printed with white, as a sign of mourning.

Her face kept the expression of a frightened animal, however, she made great efforts to make herself appear calm. Her voice betrayed her, for she tried several times before succeeding in pronouncing: "What do you wish of me?"

Benoist took from his pocket the envelope which Estelle had given him and without saying a word

placed it upon the table. Rosalie looked at it as though fascinated, she bent over to see it better. Upon recognizing her own handwriting, she recoiled to the window and supported herself as do the animals in their dens, looking at her terrible visitor.

"You remember that?" said Benoist, himself almost frightened at her attitude.

She made an affirmative sign of the head.

"You wrote it?"

She continued to look at him, but answered not.

"What was there in the letter?" asked the young man, in a severer tone.

"You know very well," said the lips, without pronouncing a sound.

"Tell me," insisted Benoist.

"No," said Rosalie, with an energetic movement of her whole being. "It is too much to have written it. I will not tell it!"

"You will have to, however," said he. "Come here!"

She remained motionless; he went to her, took her by the hand and seated her without her resisting. Great drops of perspiration ran down her cold face upon the mourning handkerchief.

"Tell me what was in the letter?"

"Never," said she, crossing her arms over her narrow, flat breast.

"You were the cause of the death of a man," said Benoist, in a menacing tone.

She shivered, her lips moved; but she said nothing.

"Monsieur de Beaurand killed himself, because he read your letter," continued he, unpityingly, "It is you who killed him."

She made the sign of the cross, moved her lips; but said nothing.

"Mme. Montclar died of sorrow a week ago, because of you. Did you know her?"

Rosalie made a negative gesture.

"She was the aunt of Monsieur de Beaurand; she loved him as a son. Did you know M. de Beaurand?"

She repeated the same gesture.

"Then why did you write that letter to him?"

She remained motionless, her lips pressed tightly together.

"Answer!" said he, with authority, "or we will have recourse to justice."

"The justice of men counts for nothing," said she slowly; "it is the justice of God only which is of value."

Benoist looked at her with a sort of internal rage. Was he powerless to make her speak? She was careless; absorbed in her terror.

"Do you know what you have done?" said he loudly. "It was you who wrote the letter, it is on account of *you* that Mme. de Beaurand is dead and it is an innocent person who is accused of having killed him."

Rosalie looked at him and a little color came to her lips.

"Yes, they have said that it is his wife who killed him. Behold what you have done!"

The face of the unfortunate became discomposed and she gave forth a smothered moan.

"Estelle?"

"Yes, Estelle. Have you been so miserable? Have you no fear of God?"

Rosalie interrupted him.

"They say that it is Estelle? It is not true. It is I who wrote the letter. Estelle could not have known."

"Then tell me what you wrote, that the innocence of Estelle may be proclaimed," said Benoist, seeing that he was gaining some ground.

Rosalie shook her head. "It is impossible," said she; "they can not be told that; they should not know the truth."

"For the honor of Estelle."

"Estelle would not wish it."

She relapsed into silence, with a despairing look and tightly closed lips. Fright had so overcome her at the first blow that she had not even dreamed of asking Benoist who he was and by what right he questioned her, the sight of the envelope was sufficient to paralyze her.

"But Estelle is miserable. Estelle is accused and all on account of you. Have you no shame?"

"I know, I saw her at Coutance. It seemed to me that it was my damnation that arose before me."

"Then tell the truth!"

"I can not!"

Benoist arose, resolved to use his last argument.

"You are responsible before God and before man."

She violently interrupted him.

"Before men, nobody knows. Before God? I have confessed and I have received absolution."

"Though he who gave it you did not know that one who was innocent was accused of your crime. You did not tell him that; God has not pardoned

you. If Estelle would not pardon you, take care of Hell, Rosalie.

At that word, the unfortunate seemed to move upon herself.

Benoist saw that the word had terrified her.

"Bring peace to your conscience," said he, approaching her; tell the truth. You will not tell it to me? Do you prefer to tell it to Estelle."

"Estelle ought not to know," groaned Rosalie, hiding her face covered with tears, with her fleshless hands. Oh Heavens! Have I not suffered enough because of the sins of others? Go away, I do not know you. You have nothing to do here, and as for Estelle, I can tell her nothing. I am grieved, yes, I am grieved that she has suffered on account of that; but—go away."

"It is well," said Benoist coldly. "I came in a spirit of peace; but if you prefer to go to prison."

"That is well," said she, with indifference.

"And afterward to Hell; for you it is who killed M. de Beaurand. They can not give you absolution for such a crime. You never told the priest that he killed himself after having read your letter."

He had struck rightly. Rosalie was completely overcome.

"You may see," continued the young man, triumphantly. "You have wished to deceive the justice of God; but you will be punished for it."

"I had not wished to kill M. de Beaurand," retorted Rosalie, with vehemence. "I only hoped to hinder the marriage, and I did my duty because it was right. If he killed himself it was not my fault."

"You say that, but it is not true. It is a lie."

"I have never lied," replied Rosalie, exasperated.

"It is an abominable lie! You can not make me believe it. You are nothing but a liar!"

He had followed upon the face of the miserable one the effect of each of his words, which burned her like a red hot dart. At the last word she arose.

"I, a liar? Well, wait. For to me, it is all the same; wait, and leave me in peace."

She opened the bureau with a singular vigor. From under a pile of cloth she took a yellow paper, and threw it upon the table angrily. Benoist took it and opened it.

It was the copy of a letter, written upon very cheap paper, with erasures and blots. The first words were, "Monsieur Raymond de Beaurand."

André Bolvin would have said, the letter had come and placed itself in the envelope.

"Go now," said Rosalie; "go."

Benoist took his hat and went out, carrying the letter with him. He staggered like a drunken man, and knew not where to go. Following a by-street, he climbed upon the rampart. There, in a half light, he found a bench of stone and seated himself. Under the blue sky, while the birds sang in the branches of a fig tree, upon the edge of the high walls of Merveille, he read the letter which had caused the death of Raymond.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

M. Raymond De Beaurand.

Monsieur: I have seen the announcement of your marriage in the papers. You should not marry Mlle. Estelle Brunaire. I was the waiting-maid of Mme. Brunaire during fourteen years, and I know all that passed during that time, when the General de Beaurand commenced to pay court to my poor mistress. When the General was dead Mme. Brunaire told me that it was her husband who had assassinated him. You see, then, Monsieur, that you can not marry Mlle. Estelle, who is your sister, by the fault of her mother. I write this to let you escape from a great sin already committed; my conscience does not permit me to keep silence when I can hinder this unhappiness. You may not believe me; however, you should, for I never have lied. Ask Mlle. Estelle if she remembers Rosalie, and of a fright which I gave her one evening at Saumeray, when she heard me call her a cursed child, a daughter of sin, because I was angry with her. Ask of her, also, how her mother was with her always severe and harsh, because she had remorse for her sin. Besides, if Mlle. Estelle has continued as she was, you have only to look at her; she resembled the General like two drops of water, while small it was striking, and I was ashamed when I took her out walking, so much was I afraid that some one would perceive the likeness. She has the same eyes, the same brow and the same mouth. Many times I had wished that she should have the small-pox that she might be disfigured; at least, that she might not show to the world the shame of her poor mother. I hope that this letter will arrive in time to hinder the wrong. Dó not strive to know me; I would be quiet now that I have discharged my conscience. I pray always for the soul of my poor mistress, who had so much sorrow, and I pray also that you may be delivered from yours.

Your Servant, Rosalie Ferel.

Benoist was motionless, the letter in his hand; the sunlight and the shadows played upon the paper through the leaves of the fig tree, moved by a light breeze; two or three children coming out of the neighboring garden, looked at him with curiosity,

and then retired, afraid of seeing him in such a place motionless. With eyes lost in the shadowy horizon, he sat, buried in thoughts.

This then was the secret of the odd trouble which the portrait of the General had thrown upon him. Those black eyes which had haunted him almost to madness, those eyes painted upon the canvas which had given him the illusion were those of Estelle, proud and soft, but living. Rosalie was right, all proof was useless before a resemblance so pronounced. Benoist understood that his friend had not doubted for an instant, he who carried the face of his father engraven upon his heart, who looked at that portrait ten times a day, he who loved passionately must have looked deeply into the eyes of his affianced.

He understood why Raymond died without explanation. What could he say? To whom could he confide the horrible revelation, and why should he do so? Loving Estelle as he did, he could not think that she, his sister, was his wife. The presence of the idea of an eternal separation had made him wish rather to die, carrying the secret with him.

Souvenirs, almost effaced, returned to his memory; how upon seeing Mme. Montclar near the young woman, he was astonished at finding in them such resemblances, differing only in age and in hair, but alike in height, in face and in appearance, with the same black eyes of which the resemblance to him now appeared so evident that he was totally surprised at never having thought of it before. "You are a true Beaurand," said Mme. Montclar, often. Alas! Yes, Estelle was a true Beaurand.

The bell tolled the hour. Benoist thought of his friend, who awaited him with the feverish anxiety of the condemned. Should he reveal the truth to her? Could he hide it from her? What would he say to her? Would she accept his silence, or a defeat?

He felt that he could not deceive her, besides after what she had suffered, a new sorrow counted little; certainly it would hurt her upon learning the fault of her mother; but she understood well now why her mother cared nothing for her. And for the memory of Raymond, he had no right to keep silent.

The young man arose, and with slow steps took his way to the little hotel. Estelle had patiently awaited him, seated near the window, with eyes fixed upon the changing horizon, without knowledge of the hours passing. The fever had left her, she had resigned herself to learn something horrible and every minute which left her in her ignorance was still a benefit.

Upon seeing her friend enter, she arose, he made her re-seat herself with a gesture, friendly and protectorial, and softly without a word he put the letter in her hand.

Frightened, she looked at him, the eyes of Benoist showed a tenderness, a pity unbounded.

"Tell me what it is," murmured she, I would like better that it come from you."

"I can not," said he. "Read. You may call me when you please."

He leaned over her and for the first time, kissed her white forehead, then went out and seated himself upon a step of the stairs.

She read, immediately blinded by tears that she mechanically wiped away. O! poor Raymond, what must he have suffered during those few minutes, the last of his life! She now understood how her portrait became torn and thrown in the fire-place, what bitterness, what renunciation. And also, in the depth of her soul, she now understood why she could not love him as he had wished. And she blessed him for having given by his silent death, a last proof of respect and tenderness.

Time rolled by, Benoist became frightened at not hearing her move. Softly opening the door, he looked at her. She raised her head and made one motion. He ran to her and clasped her in his arms that she might weep at ease, from her full heart.

After an instant of abandonment, she dried her eyes and seated herself in a chair, he drew near her that he might speak to her in a low voice.

"Behold, the mystery is cleared and I almost regret knowing it. However, it is a great source of comfort, that of having to weep"—she hesitated, then continued, blushing—"for Raymond, instead of blaming him. But my situation for myself is only more miserable. I am now nobody. I was Mlle. Brunaire, Monsieur Brunaire was not my father. I was Mme. de Beaurand, M. de Beaurand could not have been my husband. I have right to no name, I am no longer anybody."

"You are a Beaurand whatever may happen," said Benoist, with a beautiful smile which warmed the heart of Estelle, "and soon you will be my wife."

"My friend," said she, immediately, "can you understand how I feel the weight of these names

which are not mine, and of the fortunes to which I have no right?"

"Be reasonable, Estelle," said Benoist, trying to calm her; "do not exaggerate these things."

"Ah, you can not understand that which gives me so much horror. It is the fortune of the man who assassinated General de Beaurand. You can not say that I have right to that at least. I can keep neither one nor the other. I would that all were already finished."

"Patience," said Benoist, "you have many things to do, but it will take time."

Some one knocked at the door and while Estelle was drying her tear-stained eyes, he went to open it. The servant of the inn brought to him the good woman whom he recognized as the neighbor of Rosalie.

After the departure of Benoist, Rosalie became dizzy; her brain, enfeebled by a prolonged mental tension, had been very much injured by the scene which had just taken place, and when she wished to rise she fell to the floor unconscious.

The neighbor, curious like all neighbors, had waited for some time after the departure of Benoist, hoping to see her leave the house or, at least, open the door, following the usual Norman and Breton custom that she might have more light; but her waiting was fruitless. After about an hour she decided to knock at the door, being unable to contain herself longer. Hearing no response she went in that she might appease her disquietude and found the unhappy one lying near her chair.

To carry her to her bed was not difficult, for her emaciated body hardly weighed more than that of a

child. She half undressed her, chafed her hands, and seeing that it did no good, ran for the apothecary, not without making much noise over the incident.

When Rosalie opened her eyes, a half-dozen of gossips surrounded her, each one with her own favorite remedy. Notwithstanding her feebleness, she sent them away, retaining only the neighbor who put the room in order; at the end of a moment she realized what had happened, seated herself upon the bed and drew the covers over her.

How had she been able to give that letter to one unknown to her. Who was that man who had spoken to her of Raymond and of Estelle? She was overcome with fright, and imprudently she allowed to escape the secret which she had kept so closely.

"Listen," she said to her who watched her, "you will have to find the man who was here but a short time ago. You saw him, you would know him. Tell him to come to talk with me immediately."

"I will," answered the good woman, "but where does he live?"

"Find out," said Rosalie with impatience, "Mont-Saint-Michel is not so very large. One can very quickly go the rounds."

Enchanted with having a part to play in an affair which seemed to be of an interesting nature, the neighbor started on the rounds of the hotels, commencing at the nearest one. As she liked to gossip very much, a certain amount of time elapsed before she had found him. At last, by the description, the servant of the inn recognized Benoist and conducted her to him.

After having listened to the somewhat diffuse story of the officious person, Benoist turned toward Estelle.

"Let us go," said he; "if there is anything else that you wish to know, Rosalie will doubtless tell you."

They descended toward the little house; for the first time Benoist passed Estelle's arm through his, that he might prevent her slipping upon the glassy stones; she seemed very happy upon feeling herself thus protected, her saddened soul reposing upon him with an exquisite sweetness. Her eyes and her heart were full of tears at the thought of her sorrow; but in the depths of her heart she felt that the future would compensate for the past. It was thus, that, sustained and encouraged, she crossed the threshold of the cottage of her who had caused the death of two beings whom she loved.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Here is the gentleman and the lady," said the neighbor, opening the door.

Rosalie opened her eyes and was struck dumb at the sight of Estelle. She had wished to arise, her clothing, which hardly closed over her, was covered by her black mantle, which hid her whole costume. Under the rigid pleats which fell to the ground, seated upon a straw chair, she looked like a black statue of sorrow. Her eyes were fixed upon the young girl with a frightful stare.

"Rosalie," said Estelle, moved at seeing in such a condition the only woman who had well or ill cared for her in her childhood.

"Look at her, Monsieur," said Rosalie to Benoist, pointing toward her. "Look at her. She is the living portrait of her father."

Benoist softly pushed the neighbor aside who went out and closed the door.

"What do you wish of me?" said he, returning.

"I do not know you sir," said Rosalie, "I gave you the letter, I was wrong: you must give it back to me."

Without saying anything, Estelle took from her *paroissienne* the letter which she had put in the envelope by the side of the picture and gave it to her old nurse, who took it quickly and tore it into a thousand pieces.

"Now," said she, "there remains nothing at all of the secret of your family. I like this better, I have

been careful of the copy of the letter, I know not why. When I was so much tormented I re-read it in order that I might say that I had done well. Is it my picture which you have in your book? You have kept it? You have not forgotten me? Tell me, who is the gentleman who is with you?"

"I was the friend of Raymond," said Benoist, in a grave voice, "I am the fiancé of Estelle."

Rosalie's eyes went from one to the other.

"Then there must be no secret between you. It is well," sighed she, with a slight relief.

"Rosalie," said the young woman, "why did you write so late?—sooner, and much unhappiness might have been avoided."

"It was not my fault," said the wretched one, quickly, re-commencing with the real beings that combat which thirteen months before she had raised within herself. "It was not my fault. I was at Vitré at the house of my aunt when I found a number of the "*Petit Journal*" which announced your marriage. I only looked at the date and I wrote immediately. That marriage could not take place. It was an abominable sin, so I wrote immediately and when my cousin went to Laval, I gave him the letter to post. I did not wish that Monsieur de Beaurand should know where I was and come and annoy me with questions. I wished only to do my duty and be in peace. Peace! Ah! Siegneur Dieu! I have had no more for a single day, for a single minute. I did not know, as for myself, if he had married when he received the letter. I wished to hinder the marriage. Could I have thought that the unfortunate would take his own life?"

"How did you get his address?" asked Benoist.

Rosalie looked at him reproachfully.

"I had put enough of those letters in the box, for General de Beaurand. Ah, Monsieur, I had my part in the sin at another time. But I was young, I did not know, and it was for the love of my poor mistress. And I think that I have expiated it. And then when I read in the paper three days later—you will understand that I bought one every day after the letter, in order that I might know what happened—when I learned that the poor man had killed himself, I thought I should go insane."

She made with her thin arms a gesture of despair, then let them fall, and the folds of her mantle fell over her like the wings of a bat.

"I immediately took this mourning, and I have not slept a night since that moment that commenced as soon as the sun set. I said to myself, 'it is your fault,' and then I would answer, 'it was, however, necessary that he should know it. I could not allow such an act of sacrilege to take place.' And between questioning and answering myself I felt the fire in my head, and I thought I should die immediately; while I was in that state I was sure of being guilty of a mortal sin, and then——"

Her face contracted under the horrible fear of Hell, which had been the torture of her life.

"I felt safe nowhere but in the church, and there, I felt, was safety. I made vows and I made pilgrimages. But they close the churches at night, and it was at night that it came to torment me. And then one evening at Coutances I saw Estelle in mourning and that thrust a dagger in my heart.

It seemed so utterly impossible that she had married her brother. I could not comprehend the idea. When I saw her in mourning I then at least comprehended that she was a widow, though she did not know. That affected me as I can not describe. Have you had much sorrow? tell me," said she sadly as she looked at the young woman.

"I loved Raymond like a brother," said she, "I have wept very much for him."

"As a brother?" said Rosalie, leaning toward her with her face transfigured. "Only as a brother? And he killed himself immediately upon returning from the church? The good God has had a little pity for me."

She closed her eyes that she might taste a little of the internal gladness which transpired through her emaciated face. Estelle and Benoist exchanged a look. Evidently Rosalie was not responsible. The peculiar excitement had made her alike insensible to reproaches and to reason.

"Rosalie," said the young woman, softly, striving for a last proof, "they have accused me of a crime; it was your imprudence that was the cause of it."

"The cause? The cause was in the sin of the father and the mother. You have expiated for them, you should be content."

"However, they accuse me of having killed Raymond. It is very cruel, Rosalie."

"Killed?" said the wretch, shivering, "killed your brother? Oh that is horrible. Who told you so? What have you said?"

"Nothing. I supported all in silence, hoping that one day the truth might be known, and now I can say nothing. I shall continue to bear it."

Rosalie let her head fall upon her breast and seemed to be thinking profoundly. All at once she let herself slide from the chair and fell upon her knees before Estelle.

"Pardon me," said she, in a broken voice, "pardon me that I may sleep, that I may have some rest. Nobody but you could pardon me, and some one must pardon me, without which I shall lose my soul. Your fiancé thought it. I had wished to deceive God, I who never deceived anyone. I have not said in confession that M. de Beaurand had killed himself. I thought that had nothing to do with the affair. I wished to prevent a crime and I did well. My confessor said so. When he asked me if the marriage had taken place I told him that I did not know. That was a horrible lie; but then I did not want anybody to know that I was the cause of the death of M. de Beaurand. No. I could not have borne that, and I never spoke his name. And I now see that it was that which choked me. The dead could not speak and there you only were left of the family. Tell me that you will pardon me for the death of your brother and I will believe you."

She prostrated herself upon the floor shrouded in her mantle of a thousand pleats.

Estelle felt the tears of pity rise to her eyes. Why be rigorous with that poor, failing form? The fatality that had weighed so heavily upon the people of the family—could it not be pacified by a word of pardon?

"Rosalie," said Estelle, bending over to touch her with her hand, "in the name of the dead, I forgive you."

The wretched woman would rise, but she had not strength enough. Estelle and Benoist took her by the arm and seated her in a chair; she could hardly breathe.

"Thanks," said she; "thanks—I will sleep."

She closed her eyes and fell back. In a moment she seemed to recover.

"Now," said she, "I can confess all. I can say also that you have pardoned me; that will help me in my confession. I thank you very much."

She spoke simply, humbly, as she might have done for an act in every-day life.

"Do you need anything?" asked Estelle, surprised at such a lack of conscience. "Have you any income?"

"My poor mistress left me an annuity," answered Rosalie; "I want for nothing but sleep at night. I am pleased at having seen you. It is this gentleman whom you are going to marry? He has not a bad manner, even though he frightened me greatly. Oh, a fright!"

She shivered and turned her eyes.

"It was because of fear that I gave him the letter. You see, for the rest, Estelle, I am tranquil. I have no other mortal sins upon my conscience. I have not been a thief, nor arrogant, nor angry, nor anything. But they made me tell a falsehood. Of myself I have never told an evil thing, except in the times of my poor mistress, to serve her. And I had but one fear, and that was of not telling the truth, and I have lied to God. When that gentleman told me that I was a liar, I lost my head. I became enraged. At last, it is finished. God will pardon me, will He not?"

"Yes," said Estelle, profoundly affected by her frank uprightness and for the confident faith of the poor creature. He will pardon you, because you have always intended to do right, even when I was little. Adieu, Rosalie. Be in peace."

They went out of the cottage; the pure air striking their faces gave them a peculiar sensation, as though they had been for a long time shut up in a cave, damp and dark. Instinctively Benoist conducted his companion toward the deserted ramparts, where they seated themselves together upon the stone bench, where he had read the letter.

"What do you wish to do now?" said he.

Estelle was looking away, toward the east.

"Return to Paris," said she, "and go to the tomb of Raymond. You see, my friend, I have not enough tears for the unfortunate. My heart bleeds when I think of his last moments."

"He lived happily," Benoist remarked, sadly.

Estelle said nothing, and he saw that she was crying under her veil.

"Cry, my dear," said he, affectionately; "these tears are honest and pure, fraternal tears which do you honor."

She understood that he had ceased to be jealous.

"Then," said she, mastering her sorrow, "what are you going to do?"

"Accompany you to Paris; then I shall go and see my mother."

She questioned him with a look, and contented herself with a mute response.

"And you?" questioned he.

"As for me, I do not know what. Soumeray

frightens me. I find there only the souvenirs of my childhood, and it is those above all which I wish to forget. At the hôtel de Beaurand I am horrified, I no longer have an asylum. However, it will take several days for me to plan my life. I ask of you still one thing more, my friend; with all the fortune of the de Beaurands, I would erect something that would be of use—a hospital or an asylum. Rather an asylum for those who have neither parents nor friends. It shall be to the memory of Raymond and of his father. I have thought of it for a long time, and at present I am resolved. There remains to me the fortune of my mother—the only one to which I have any right."

"It shall be done," responded Benoist. "I only ask you to wait for a short time that I may see my mother, that I may speak with her."

Estelle bowed her head.

"Very well," said she. "Your mother would not have me for a daughter if she knew the truth, but nevertheless——"

"My mother is honest and kind," said Benoist. "I have great faith in her justice. But whether she consents or not, Estelle, I said to you, you are my wife."

An hour afterwards, they departed from Mont-Saint-Michel.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Upon arriving at Paris upon the morning of the next day, Benoist assured himself first that Estelle arrived home safely, then about ten o'clock, he went to the office of André Bolvin.

The young deputy, without saying a word, listened to the secret confided to his honor. When all had been explained he looked at his guest.

"I told you that the secret was relative to Mme de Beaurand; only the history is a little rare and curious. The misfortune is that I can see no way in which Mme. de Beaurand can be done justice by the public."

"She does not think of it," replied Benoist, coldly, "she is above public opinion. I have promised to tell you the truth if I should ever succeed in finding it out myself. I have succeeded, and moreover, I wish to reveal to him who suspected her the proofs of her innocence which are the most striking."

"You dislike me," said Bolvin, with a shade of regret, "and I believe that Mme. de Beaurand will never pardon me, nevertheless——"

"Mme. de Beaurand always pardons," said Benoist, rising.

After a short silence, Bolvin looked at his guest openly.

"Will you tell her that I present to her my most humble apology and that if she will herself inform me of its acceptance I shall esteem myself happier than I have merited being?"

"I will tell her," replied he.

They separated and Bolvin upon returning to his desk, much mortified as he was to show such lightness with regard to so grave a thing, could not avoid affirming to himself with entirely professional satisfaction that he had been right in supposing that the real cause of the suicide rested in Estelle.

Benoist, immediately took the train, in order to arrive at Pressoirs that afternoon. His mother, whom he had informed by telegram, awaited him with a secret impatience, well hidden under her ordinary aspect of busy serenity. When they were alone together in the large dining-room, shaded at that season by the tall cytisus, the bunches of which stopped the least air from entering by the windows, Theodore placed his chair almost against that of Mme. Benoist and told her slowly in its fullest details the sad history of that tragical family.

She listened without interruption with lips pressed tightly together. Her knitting had escaped from her diligent hands and not a movement in her betrayed the least emotion. When the story was ended, she raised toward her son her beautiful bright eyes veiled with a slight dampening of tears.

"You say that she pardoned that wretched woman?" said she, softly.

"Entirely, and with good will. You see, mamma, you can not know how good she is, she is as good as you."

Without allowing herself to be moved by that tender word, she began her kitting.

"She wishes to found an asylum with the property of the Beaurands?" said she, at last; "well

that's good, she is right; but the money of her father —or the husband of her mother, I should say—what is she going to do with that?"

"I do not know, she has told me that that fortune is odious to her."

"She ought to return it to the family of that gentleman. One can always find relations nearer or farther. That money belongs to them, it does not belong to her."

"You see, mamma, that she has had the same idea with regard to it."

Mme. Benoist knitted a few stitches silently and then stopped.

"My son," said she, "I understand well what you have told me. That lady is very good, and I esteem her very much. But, in any event, her mother was lacking in her duties. I would have nothing to say against having her for a daughter-in-law if there was nothing to be said about her family. You see, one might learn no matter what about General de Beaurand; but with her, it is another thing; I had not expected that, my child."

"Mother," said the young man, with extreme softness, "she is innocent."

"I did not say she was not; but all the same that torments me much, very much, my son."

"Mamma," said he, with a caressing inflection, which deprived his words of the least appearance of reproach, "it is you who taught me my duty towards her when I was unjust and prejudiced."

"Be still," said Mme. Benoist, softly; "I know it."

The wind pushed against the windows the bunches of the cytisus, which seemed to ask to enter; a little

bird struck its wings against one of the window-panes, which gave forth a sharp sound, and it perched upon a branch, singing.

"Mother," said Benoist, "she is alone. Alone in the world with her dead, in a house full of distressing remembrances. And, notwithstanding all the fortune which remains to her, she has no place to go."

The old lady, with a sign of her head, indicated that she understood.

"She has no one but me in the world, mamma; no one but me to love her and console her. I had thought that she had us two. I had thought that you would be to her a mother, such as she never had. She loves you very much. She is full of respect and kindness. If you will not consent to have her for a daughter I believe that she will die of grief and sorrow; but she would not have for you one word of reproach. She is so good."

"Would you blame me," said Mme. Benoist, looking at him from the bottom of her soul.

"I would suffer much, mother—more than I can tell; for I love her as my father loved you; but I would not blame you, since it would be for the honor of the family."

"Would that stain be nothing to you?" asked the old lady, in a severe tone.

"Nothing, because Estelle has none from her mother. From her head to her feet, soul included, she is a Beaurand, and the Beaurands were honor itself."

Mme. Benoist did not answer and remained thoughtful.

The little bird had ceased to sing; obstinately it came to the window, which it struck with blows, redoubled, of beak and wing, before the obstacle it recoiled, frightened.

Mme. Benoist arose, opened the window wide, waited an instant to see if it would return; then seeing that it had gone away, looked outside.

Under the arch of the cytisus could be seen upon the edge of the horizon the valley smoking under the sun.

The heated earth, the roses in bloom, the grass ready to be mowed, showed an abundance of vigor and of the life which filled her aged heart. She thought of her young years, of the love which she had for her husband, of the joys which her son, devoted almost to sacrifice, had brought to her.

Without a sound she left the dining-room, while Theodore, with his elbows upon the table, thought with a tenderness full of profound pity of Estelle, alone in her mansion, always alone; above all, alone, since his mother would not consent to accept her as a daughter.

The door opened in a short time, and Mme. Benoist returned. She had taken off her bonnet of linen and put on the lace hat reserved for Sunday mass. Dressed in a gown and a mantle of rich black silk, she was no longer the vintner of Pressoirs, but a beautiful old lady of the province.

"Let us go and find her," said she to her son, who took her arm.

After a visit to the tomb of the de Beaurands, which she had covered with flowers, Estelle returned to the hôtel. She looked at it now as a sort of

curiosity, as though it were a strange home to which she had been called for a moment, and to which she should no longer return.

She occupied the afternoon in seeking, among the things which belonged to her, those which were dear, that she might take them away, and that she might arrange all the rest for the numerous personnel of the large house. After a short dinner, she called the domestics to the office, and went over alone, in the light of the descending day, the many rooms of the *rez-de-chaussée.*

Many remembrances returned to her. Slowly, often stopping, Estelle re-lived the thirteen months which she had just passed. All her moral existence was enclosed there. She separated herself from them without regret, having suffered too much to not desire to forget; the future would be the part of the good and the bad hours.

Upon the threshold of Raymond's room she hesitated. Should she awaken the now sleeping impressions at the risk of opening the wounds of her heart? Duty commanded, however, that she destroy all the papers of Raymond remaining upon his desk, and that no hand should touch them. She entered.

Across the threshold, a very mysterious sentiment without bitterness brought tears to her eyes; but she still preserved control of herself. The large room was already darkened; upon the mantel the candelabra was filled with candles. Slowly, as with respect, but with a firm hand, Estelle lighted them all, threw a burning paper into the fire-place, and commenced her holy work.

One after the other she opened the drawers of the

writing-desk, and threw into the flames all that they contained, except the cross of the General and the military medallion of Raymond, which she placed apart. Letters and diplomas burned together, all that had been dear or disliked, all that any profane eye should not see.

When the last spark had ceased to run in the blackened paper, Estelle arose, took a few steps forward, and looked at the portrait of the General.

A sad and sweet emotion overcame her; her hands were clasped before her, and her eyes sought, in the depths of the eyes of the portrait, a response to her mute question.

She had not known a father; that word, for her, void of sense, had taken a great importance on the lips of Raymond. It was a struggle for her to understand the honor which he bore for his dead father. By respect for the memory of the General, by affection for his son, she had religiously collected all that he had communicated to her during the time of their courtship.

And that was all that she knew of her father.

"My father," said she to him, "would you have loved me?"

It seemed to her that at that thought the proud and soft eyes of the portrait, so like her own, reproached her for having questioned it. "It was upon them that Raymond fixed his last look," thought she, suddenly. "What did they say to him?"

Upon the remembrance of that tragical day, she shuddered. The place where the blood had run, staining his room, was still marked upon the newly-scraped floor. Estelle sought for it with her eyes,

and kneeled upon it, her eyes fixed upon the portrait of the General.

"My father," said she, "my dear father, I would have loved you much."

She burst into tears and gave way under her broken heart. Too many sorrows, too many thoughts weighed upon her innocent youth; the weight which was so heavy upon her shoulders, would it never be removed by a pitying hand? Now she realized the weight of the shame and the blood.

A sound of voices near the door made her rise quickly. Some one knocked. Drying her tear-stained face, she told them to enter.

Mme. Benoist appeared upon the threshold, followed immediately by her son, whose noble figure Estelle perceived in the shade. At the sight of that little woman in black, she felt her mortal load to fly away, as though it had wings. The apparition of an angel dressed in glory could not have appeared more luminous to her.

"My daughter," said Mme. Benoist, "will you come with us?"

She fell into the arms that were opened to her.

FINIS.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 065 430 1